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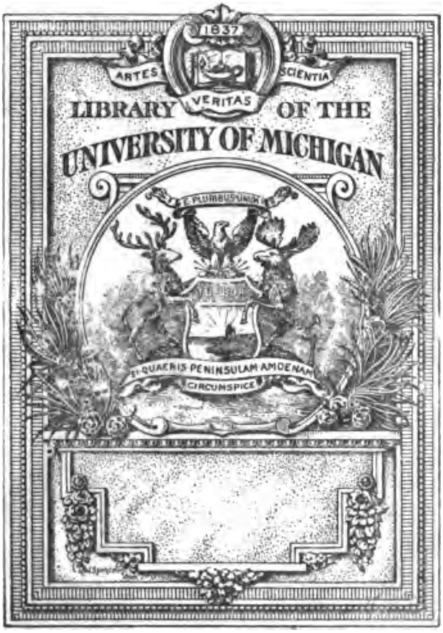
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THE
MANNERINGS

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BY

ALICE BROWN

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CONTENTS

Chap. Page

I. On Edgcombe Hill 1
II. A Letter from Lorraine 13
III. The House in the Woods 26
IV. A Confidence 39
V. Old Love Estranged 50
VI. Hearts Inspired 59
VII. Revolt 67
VIII. Guests 76
IX. In One Forenoon 91
X. High Tea at Horne's 101
XI. Man and Wife 108
XII. Two Daughters of One Race . . . 118
XIII. Madam Walsingham 130
XIV. Natalie 140
XV. A New Note 148
XVI. A Dual Solitude 158
XVII. Brice and Natalie 169
XVIII. A Pair of Gloves 176
XIX. Earth and the Man 188
XX. An Equal Right 196
XXI. A Gift Refused 209
XXII. Levinski 218
XXIII. The Ghost of a Bride 229
XXIV. Hunted into Corners 237
XXV. For Natalie 247
XXVI. Snow 259
XXVII. Saint Christopher 272
XXVIII. In the East Chamber 283
XXIX. The Stars 291
XXX. The Messenger 301

129176

XXXI. Sense and Spirit 308
XXXII. The Dark Place 321
XXXIII. Love Denied 333
XXXIV. Betrayal 339
XXXV. A Vow Renewed 347
XXXVI. The Ways of Life 354
XXXVII. Cassie 365
XXXVIII. The Orchard 374

THE
MANNERINGS

THE MANNERINGS

I

ON EDGCOMBE HILL

It was a winter's twilight, still and cold. Katharine Mannering, waiting in her sleigh at the station a mile from Edgcombe village, looked about over the hills and fields, and loved them the more because Elinor Thayer was coming. Sometimes she rebelled against this far-extended quiet; to-day it held the promise of old friendship happily renewed. The gray little station made a homely blot on miles of snow. The wide sweep of fields where it stood was like a map painted here and there with evergreen patches and cut by boundary fences and the brush-bordered line of river running down to the village beneath. This was an undulating land of ample distances, but toward the north it rose in the long sweep of Edgcombe Hill. Men of a simple habit lived in the village, and certain of the quality, as unpretending in their ways, had built upon the upland. Each knew the other and there was respect between them; but each, constrained by kindred reasons, kept to his own level, and was satisfied.

The sky had been clear since morning, but at sunset clouds had risen in the west, and now they were dove-gray and rose. It was early winter, yet it seemed to have been winter for a long time, the snow was so piled and billowed and the sky so responsive in its clear, bright cold.

Katharine Mannering looked at the west when Mack, the great black horse, would let her; from time to time he had to be steadied by a confidential word. He was made like the war horse of Scripture; but though intended for proud uses, he had developed a weak ankle, and now dwelt humbly on Edgcombe Hill. His old spirit yet lived in him; but when he strained and leaped, his ankle took him suddenly and cooled his blood. He remembered his mortality. Katharine loved him; she drove him understandingly, and told him how great spirits scorn the incidents of flesh. The woman herself looked as untamed as the horse. She was tall and generously made, with a wonderful harmony of bone and muscle. Her face, rather daring in outline, had a gaunt beauty, and there was something potent in the glance of her challenging brown eyes. Her skin was fine, suffused with wholesome color; not the hard red to match brown hair or black, but the pink healthfulness belonging to red hair. For topping her favors she had a great richness of that hair, straight, rather coarse, and too heavy for any woman's head unless she carried the burden proudly.

Katharine was eager in her happiness this night. Yet she was never anything less, either in joy or grief. Her blood always ran fast, her hands were swift to do, and her feet ready to carry her where life was hottest.

"So, Mack!" she said, when he forgot his ankle after delusive resting. "Steady, boy, steady!"

A man appeared over the crest of a knoll, and came through the snow with an unhindered stride. He was tall and broad, and, from some effect of the light, he looked gigantic. Katharine, as she saw him, smiled a little, and her eyes widened to black. She knew him. The sight of him pleased her. He stepped over the low stone wall on the other side of the track and came straight toward her. He was made, in the comeliness of his strength, to be the delight of woman's eyes; his great body had a fine interplay of muscle, his thin face was toughened by outdoor life, and he had the glance of a hawk, undaunted when it touched the world of nature and elusive in encountering men. They were strange eyes, honest as the light they fed on, and yet, like those of a wild creature, refusing their confidence. You could not get behind them. Midway across the track, he took off his cap to Katharine, and then, coming nearer, gave Mack a tranquillizing touch and stood there with a hand on the horse's flank.

"Come home with us," said Katharine, smiling in a fashion to show how he completed her pleasure in the day.

"No, I'll walk, thank you." His voice had an extreme gentleness in its rounded compass. "Have you spoken to 'Siah about the trunks?"

"Yes. He'll take them up in the pung."

"Then I won't wait." He turned away, and struck presently into the fields that lie over Edgcombe Hill.

Katharine watched him and fell to musing. There was a vague disturbance about him, perplexing to her who did not hold the freedom of his city. The hiding spirits behind his eyes never betrayed themselves to her; yet she made shrewd guesses, and when he was disquieted, her blood also changed its flow.

The train ran in, and one passenger alighted and came swiftly out across the platform. She was a slender woman with distinction in her walk.

"Elinor!" called Katharine irrepressibly, at the moment of her appearing. "Elinor!"

Elinor Thayer gave a gesture betokening haste, and then, in spite of herself, turned and looked up the hill. The man, now far upon his way, had halted and was gazing down at her. He took off his cap. She was not near enough to see his face, but she stood quite still for an instant, regarding him. Then she broke away from some enchaining fancy, and made a little run to Katharine. But against her will, the first words she spoke surprised her as she said them, —

"Is that Gilbert Horne?"

"Come, Nell, come!" cried Katharine. She had thrown back the robe, trembling in her pleasure. "Give me your checks. Here, 'Siah!" She tossed them at the stage-driver appearing round the corner, and he caught them lazily. "Nell, how pretty you are! how young you look!"

"Was that Gilbert Horne?" Her voice was low, significant, and it thrilled upon Katharine with the sweetness of dim memories. Hot tears burned her eyes. She felt like a girl again, assailed by the pathos of youth, its pain and longing.

"Yes, it was Gilbert Horne. But look at me. We won't go home till morning unless you look at me."

Elinor laughed, and they fronted each other in pure pleasure.

"You 're the loveliest thing that ever was," said Katharine conclusively. "It 's France, I suppose,—Paris gowns, Italian graces. No, it 's you, Nell, still. You 've only bloomed. Come, Mack. Now, boy, now!"

Mack, ignoring his infirmity, threw up his head and plunged at a pretty pace up Edgcombe Hill. Elinor regarded the white country with delighted eyes. She seemed to be breathing in more than air, and her pleasure made her beautiful. There was always a rare delicacy about her, laid like a veiling loveliness on health and sanity. Her profile was exquisite, and the short upper lip had a pretty uplift unexpected enough to break the purity of line and stamp a flaw upon perfection. Her eyes were brown, and her thick brown hair grew sweetly about her face. A third of the way up the hill, Mack quieted into a steady gait, and Katharine said,—

"Do you know it 's nine years since you were in America?"

"I know it."

"Do you know I 'm forty years old?"

Elinor laughed. It was a little low runnel of fun, deliciously incongruous with the sweet gravity of her face.

"I don't think much about age," she said.

"You would if you were forty. You could n't forget it night or day."

"I 'm thirty-three!"

"Dear, you look like a baby."

The other woman smiled a fine little smile; it seemed to put personal comment out of the question.

"How is your husband?" she asked.

"Brice? Well, God-a-mercy!"

"And his father?"

"The captain?"

"Yes. Why did we call him that?"

"No reason. Brice named him to indicate his supremacy. The captain is well also. Unchanged, absolutely unchanged! Every hair on that magnificent head lies as when you saw it last. He sits down to his Homer at precisely five minutes after nine every morning. He opens it at the same place he did nine years ago. He reads ten lines, and then dozes until somebody comes into the room. Then he reads the same ten lines again. The book falls open at that place if you look at it. To-night at dinner he 'll ask you about the color of Minerva's eyes."

Elinor laughed again, with the air of doing some discourtesy.

"You 're not a good child," she commented.

"Good? I 'm wicked! They 've goaded me too far." Her cheeks were flaming with excitement and the cold. Her eyes flamed also.

"Who are they?"

"The immortal gods."

"Poor Kate! What have they done to you?"

Katharine's face broke suddenly, as if tears would follow. She shook her head in brief impatience, as a horse shakes back his mane. A breath caught dryly in her throat, but she spoke with an eloquent harshness.

"That 's like you, you little beast, making me tell everything I know. I never saw your match for pulling the heart out of one's breast. I meant to tell you, though. I 'm tired of hiding things, tired of lying, tired of saying 'good Lord and good devil.' I promised myself you should know the worst of me when you came. But I never thought I should begin so soon."

A vague trouble lay lightly upon Elinor's face, not dispersing the tranquillity there, but clouding it. This tranquillity was a strange thing in one so open to varying moods in others, so likely to respond. She seemed to have some secret life whereon her outer being was planted, like a growing thing. Thence it drew its nourishment; it drank from wells of certainty.

"Poor Kate!" she said again. "I 'm sorry."

"No, don't be sorry. It 's nothing real. The house has n't burned down, we 're no poorer than we were, and we have n't had 'grip' for two years. I am simply a rebellious spirit."

"Your husband is in business, of course?" asked Elinor at random.

"Don't call him my husband. Call him Brice, as you used to. Yes, he 's still in business. He gets up at precisely five minutes before seven every morning. He breakfasts at ten minutes before eight. He takes the eight forty-three train and goes in town. He goes to his bookstore just as his father goes to his Homer, and there he and one clerk doze all day. Sometimes they sell two books a week. That is, I fancy so. Nobody tells me. If I ask Brice, he looks owlish again and says he has n't seen the account for the month. We could n't live if Natalie did n't stay with us and pay her board."

"Ah, she 's his cousin!"

"She 's a Mannering, yes — a sort of thirtieth cousin. He had charge of her property; so she drifted into living with us. She might not stay if it were n't for Richard Horne."

"Richard Horne? Do I know him?"

"Gilbert's nephew. He 's down here off and on with his uncle, — he 's a journalist in town, — and Natalie 's engaged to him."

"Ah!"

"It 's a case of long standing, ever so many years now. Richard is a queer, fascinating fellow, musical, artistic, with wild blood in him. He gets a gilt-edged position, works like a horse, throws over the whole thing and runs amuck, to Europe, to the Andes, and then comes back and begins all over. Natalie waits for him and waters her plants. They seem to be perfectly satisfied."

"So he lives with his uncle?"

"No, he lives in town, but he 's always running down here. I wrote you about Gilbert Horne?"

"Yes." There was a curious restraint in Elinor's air. With Gilbert Horne's name a new note had throbbed into Katharine's voice. Each woman had gained a certain intensity, though not of a kind to be shared. They seemed to be speaking from a background of reminiscence all their own.

"Gilbert Horne is free at last. I don't know whether you remember, but his mother was half insane, and he took care of her in his own house."

"His stepmother." Elinor corrected her delicately.

"Yes, of course; but we always called her his mother. No other man would have done it, no man I ever saw. It ought to have sapped his life as well as ruined his prospects; but it 's only made him silent. I don't remember how well you knew him."

"I did n't know him long."

"It was that last summer you came here, was n't it? Mrs. Horne must have been losing her mind just about that time. She made him promise not to send her away. He kept his word, and she 's eaten up his life. But she died last April. He was going West, but he suddenly decided to put it off."

"You wrote me he was going. You said he would be gone the first of the month."

"Did I? Well, he changed his mind. Here we are. There 's the old house. Remember it?"

Elinor leaned forward a little as they rose over the crest of the hill, and her lips parted as if they took in something eagerly desired. The Mannering house, a great colonial mansion distorted by comely additions, stood on the southwestern slope of Edgcombe Hill, where it had breathing space, an amplitude of light and air, and yet where no harsh wind could beat upon it. The hill hesitated a little before descending in a wide plateau of fertile fields. The house was approached by a driveway from the road. Evergreens stood in front of it, but not so near as to darken the windows in winter or to give too hot a breath in summer time. An orchard lay at the side, and across its breadth spanned by a little path stood Gilbert Horne's house, smaller than this, untouched in its old proportions, and reaching the road by a nave-like avenue of elms.

"I remember," breathed Elinor. "I remember!" But she was looking not at the sweep of land below where the lake lies, a gleam in summer and a blank in winter, or at the line of poplars that came walking over the windy hill. Gilbert Horne's house seemed to be smiling back at her through the lacelike winter trees.

They had turned into the driveway and Elinor recalled herself from musing, to put on the air of accessible human courtesy.

"There they are," said Katharine. "The captain will kiss your hand. Brice will act as if he wanted to, but he won't venture for another decade. I 've trained him excellently, dear. He can do no end of tricks automatically. He won't do them for me, but he does for other women."

The front door opened as they stopped at the veranda steps, Mack with a final fling of his head, and two men came out, strikingly alike in spite of thirty years between them. At first glance they were remarkably handsome, each dowered with a secondary lustre through the other's presence, as three pretty girls are ten times as pretty as two, bearing with them, like a banner, the challenge of their sex. Both had dark eyes and trim pointed beards, though the younger man was black as to his beard and hair and the captain had turned magnificently white. His hair was aggressive in its silver beauty. It created, with the aid of his fine black brows, a delusive distinction. They both carried themselves well, and their hands were notably fine.

The younger man hurried down the steps while his father stood above, expectant.

"At last!" said Brice Mannering, giving Elinor his hand and helping her from the sleigh. "This is delightful! How do you find yourself?" He seemed to pass her to his father up the steps, while he turned to meet Katharine, and the old gentleman, according to prophecy, bent gallantly and kissed her glove. John Henry, the hired man, appeared and walked away with Mack to the barn, and Katharine ran up the steps, tossing the robe at her husband as she went. She was at once buoyantly gay. She had got what she wanted; after long dearth, here was her Elinor.

"There, Nell!" she said, as they went together into the broad hall. "You are at home."

"The Spaniards, I believe, have a custom," — began the old man, with the air of telling an after-dinner story. But no one save Brice seemed to hear him, and he went into the house finishing it with an air of great exactness.

"Ah!" said Katharine as she was taking off Elinor's cloak. "Here 's Natalie."

A girl was coming down the broad, old-fashioned stairs. Elinor looked up at her and breathed a little sound of pleasure mixed with wonder. It was a vision not so much of definite loveliness as of those suggested beauties that enchain the soul. Natalie was slender almost to a fault, with the small arms of undeveloped creatures, and their motions. In color she had a curious likeness to Katharine, yet in complete effect that kinship failed. Her face was delicate and thin, her mouth a lovely line of curves ending in dented corners, and her hair the same red glory of Katharine's, save that it curled, full of life, and broke into little spirals. But her eyes were not the brown eyes of the red; they were gray, deepening to darkness and showing gleams of yellow and then green.

They lay like jewels under their dark lashes, and she used them honestly. She wore a white dress that hung in simple folds held by a golden girdle. Her bare neck showed the lovely hollows of girlhood, and on her arms were barbaric bracelets that fell down to the hand and had to be incessantly pushed up again.

"Here 's Natalie," said Katharine, and Elinor answered, under her breath, so that only Katharine heard, —

"The blessed damozel!"

As Natalie reached the lower stair, the guest stepped forward and they clasped hands, Natalie smiling a little in a courteous welcome, but evidently not caring very much who went or came. Katharine looked at the white dress and nodded.

"So Richard 's coming!" she said.

"Yes," returned Natalie indifferently, "Dick is coming." She had a low voice consistent with her look. It promised some intensity.

"Come, Elinor," said Katharine, "I 'll take you to your room. I 've been getting it ready for a week. You can see your face in it."

II

A LETTER FROM LORRAINE

When the women had gone upstairs, Mannering and his father went into the library at the right of the front door and established themselves, each in a wellworn chair with individual hollows in it as if the same person had sat there a great deal. The old gentleman took up an ancient looking book from the table, opened it on his knee, and stared for a moment at the fire. Then, still holding the book, he dropped off to sleep. Brice read the evening paper, solicitously making no noise and glancing at his father from time to time, with a careful interest. The room was pervaded by a twilight stillness. Everything in it was worn, yet it had comfort of a homely sort. The long windows, reaching to the floor, opened on the veranda and the outer space of evergreens and snowy ground. There was no great pretense of books, yet there were enough to please the eye and justify the mind in sinking into that peace known only in rooms where books have lived. The walls were hung with dull red paper, and on the table in front of the fire was a lamp, brilliant with daily care. This room was a consistent bit of the whole house, where ancient furniture bespoke prosperity, and everything bore the air of having been used in the daily habit of life. Opposite, across the wide hall where the staircase descended, was a room of identical size furnished similarly, though without the books. It looked out on the orchard and over to the yellow wall of the Horne house; and behind it was the dining-room, rather severe in its dark walls and solid chairs and table, but with the fire leaping and gleaming on the hearth. John Henry, the hired man, said the Mannerings burned "a sight o' wood." Here at least all the members of the household were moved by an according aim. Katharine had a willful recklessness in using the goods of life. She wanted abundance everywhere and enough to waste; and the others, save Natalie, were keen upon the scent of daily comfort.

The hour before dinner drowsed sleepily away, and the two men drowsed with it in a mental apathy. The clock struck, and the women came down the stairs with a pleasant rustling and a hint of fragrance that was none at all. The men came to themselves with a start — it could hardly be called waking — and went into the hall to meet them. A stranger glancing at them would have been struck by the exceeding good looks of the little assembly. Natalie in her white and gold, her poetic suggestion of something more thrilling than beauty, was in strong contrast with Katharine, who had not dressed for dinner, but who made up for outer circumstance by the vividness of her great pleasure. Her eyes were dark with it, her cheeks held a deeper tinge. She wore a blue cloth dress, with a white collar and bands of fur. It fitted snugly and disclosed a figure adapted to all sweet and homely uses. She looked like a Diana grown to middle age without losing strength or grace. Elinor, in her traveling dress by Katharine's order, bore her years with a difference. She had carried her girlish lines into womanhood. She was gracious in a delicate way, with the charm that eludes and then returns to beckon.

As they turned toward the dining-room, the front door opened, and a young man walked in on them. He brought a great draught of cold air, and the freshness that hangs about the traveler in winter weather.

"Richard!" said Katharine, pausing in an impulsive welcome. "Glad to see you."

Natalie stood waiting while he was presented to the guest. He turned to her. She had grown vivid in a way that had brought the blood to his heart when he first noted it years ago. Now he was used to it. It meant not so much a mood as Natalie. But she nodded at him in a fashion betokening comradeship, and gave him a careless hand. Then while they sat down at the table, he took off his coat in the hall, and presently came in to his waiting place. Seating himself, he looked round at them with an inclusive smile. He was pleased with them all, with life and the circumstances where he found himself, and every one, in the simple, responsive way of human creatures challenged by vitality, was pleased with him. He sat beside Natalie, and, taking his napkin, he gave her hand lying on the table a touch of light good fellowship. She took no notice of him, but she looked at the hand in a curious, impersonal way, and a new meaning came into her face. Richard was a tall, close-knit fellow with a head beautifully carried. It was rather small for his size, and with his hands, fine as those of a woman, gave him an air of distinction. His features were cut with a good bold dash, his blue eyes were merry, and the close mustache adorned a frankly genial mouth.

"Have you been to Greece?" the captain was saying, with a deferential bow toward Elinor.

Brice was carving chicken, and Katharine watched him impatiently, anticipating certain false moves she knew by heart.

"No," returned Elinor, with a pretty deference, "no; we traveled very little. France suited my father. We spent a great deal of time in the French country about Tours. Then we went into Italy, high up among the Apennines."

The old gentleman had received his plate containing a carefully selected portion and was regarding it with expectance.

"Greece has always had a peculiar interest for me," he said, in his fragmentary manner. "Yes — ah — Greece! My studies, all my reading, have led me in that direction."

"Father, you know," interposed Brice, with an explanatory smile, — "father is a great student of the classics."

"I know; I remember," said Elinor. Katharine, she felt, was mentally prophesying the advent of the gray-eyed Pallas.

"My studies have led me in that direction," repeated the old gentleman, contemplating his chicken in a detached yet amorous manner. He seemed to be perpetually ignoring crude indulgences in favor of high thinking, and yet to be at the same time lost in absent worship of them. "I have not relinquished my hope of seeing Greece."

"Father and I intend to see it together," added Brice, in a prompt corroboration.

"There is no richer field in the world," asserted the old man, with a tolerant smile at his son; "Greek antiquities, Greek literature, Greek mythology! The gods, now — what should you say of Pallas — Minerva, you know — Athene — quite the same thing — should you say she had blue eyes or gray?"

Elinor realized that all eyes were upon her, Katharine's kindling with a mirth duteously suppressed.

"I never thought of it, Captain Mannering," she answered. "I know so very little about the classics."

"A wide field, my dear Miss Thayer, a wide and very fertile field." The captain had sent back his plate for dressing. He put his finger tips together in the familiar attitude of men who prose by habit. "About the eyes of Pallas, it seems to be a disputed point. The gray-eyed Pallas, the gray-eyed maid — Chapman, I believe, says the gray-eyed maid. A very little of the dressing, Brice, and — ah, is that the oyster? Thank you. If no one else cares for it! A favorite bit with many — but if no one cares! As I was saying, gray or blue, blue or gray" —

He seemed to be wandering into an intermediate ground where neither chicken nor Pallas could hold him, and his son leaned forward recalling him by glance and tone.

"You were speaking of Pallas, father," he prompted him. "I fancy the term refers to expression, not to color."

"Ah, yes, yes! that was what I was about to say," continued the old man, pinning himself with a visible effort to the subject in hand. "The primary meaning is flashing, gleaming, bright." He repeated the qualifying words like a schoolboy who has learned something with difficulty and can only be at ease after he has recited it. Then, as if the topic were adequately closed, he devoted himself to his plate.

"Why did n't you bring your uncle over to dinner?" asked Katharine of Richard.

"He would n't come. I left him eating his solitary bun and reading a book."

Brice Mannering never forgot the conventional platitude.

"Glad to see him at any time," he remarked; and Richard continued, —

"He would n't come himself and he forbade me. He told me you had company; so I came. I had to see Miss Thayer." He smiled at Elinor as he used her name, in a sudden, fascinating way he had, and she looked at him now so inquiringly that he asked, "Do you know my uncle?"

"I knew him once," she replied, in a low tone, "a long time ago."

"I asked him, and he said you were Mrs. Mannering's friend. Evidently I was meant to forsake the house until you and Mrs. Mannering had foregathered."

"We 're going snowshoeing when the moon is up," said Katharine. "He promised, Sunday. That was before I knew Elinor would be here. But of course we 're going."

"Well, he 's no idea of it," said Richard. "We 'll run over when it 's time, and rout him out. Are you going, sister?" This was to Natalie, who sat regarding the window opposite her in evident indifference to the talk. Yet she heard, she noted, and carried on an unspoken commentary of her own.

"Yes, brother, I 'm going," she answered without glancing at him.

"In these togs? How nice you look!"

"Not in these togs. I don't look nice. I look cold. Cousin Katharine, may somebody poke the fire?"

Richard sprang from his chair with an apology to Katharine, and hammered away at the logs until the sparks flew up the chimney and the flames followed them, roaring. There was a little courteous commotion, the old gentleman insisting upon Natalie's taking his place because it was warmer, and yet not moving, and she refusing in a way to match.

"There 's a blue scarf in the library," she suggested to Richard when he left the fire, and he went to fetch it. When he came back with it, a billowing tissue, he dropped it on her shoulders, and she glowed under it.

"You change color like a lizard," he said to her, taking his seat. "Your eyes are different the minute you put on blue."

"It is n't a lizard, it 's a chameleon," returned Natalie, while the others were talking.

"A chameleon 's a lizard. I shall call you a chameleon if I want to."

"You 're rude," said Natalie calmly.

When they rose from the table, Richard said to Katharine, —

"May I go upstairs and look at Natalie's flowers?"

"Goose!" Katharine was laughing at the door, an arm, girl fashion, about Elinor's waist. "Ask Natalie."

"She 's vicious to-night!" He shot a glance at Natalie standing by the fire.

"Then I can't help you."

"May I, Natalie?" He coaxed like a boy.

"They 're not very pretty now," she answered. "I cut a lot of them to-day."

He looked at her again like a boy willfully bent on mischief, and then ran whistling up the stairs. Natalie stood by the fire for a moment after the others had left the room, her pretty foot tapping the bricks. Presently she walked about a little in a feline fashion, uneasiness upon her, and finding herself near the door went out into the hall and upstairs also. She seemed to be drawn by an irresistible mandate, upon her lover's steps. It made her angry to be so constrained, not angry with him but with herself; and there were bright spots of color on her cheeks when she entered the room above. This obedience was a sweet servitude she had once been glad to follow. Now she fought against it for the sake of his freedom, not her own.

This was her sitting-room, painted in white and papered with garlanded flowers. Muslin curtains hung at the windows. The carpet was moss green. A green velvet divan followed the walls, and the air was warm with fragrance. Natalie heard admiring talk, from time to time, about her magical gardening. Richard thought it one of her pretty ways to busy herself in such tendance, not knowing she had the flowers only because he took pleasure in them. He was by the window when she went in, smelling the bitter jonquils, saturating himself with them, moved by them in a way Natalie knew. She stood by the fire and trembled with love of him. He was a perfectly healthy animal, with nerves responsive to sensuous joys. No wind could blow from any corner without moving him to some vibration. He felt the keenness of life in a way that would have been disheartening if his swift blood had not kept him well poised and healthy. Yet he lived without speculating upon the effect things had on him. He only knew the world was a place where he enjoyed acutely, and where it was the part of a wise man to avoid pain. There were premonitions of pain sometimes, savage denial of savage joys, and he took them doggedly. To his own mind he was an unclassified force tossed here and there by varying breezes. He made no pretense of understanding himself; yet he had a child's trust that Natalie understood. He left the flowers and came to her by the fire. He put out both hands and she placed hers within them with a disarming frankness; but when he drew her gently toward him, she threw back her head and smiled at him. So she dominated him, and slew the tenderness she loved.

"You look very nice," he said.

His utterance had quickened, his eyes were dark. Such intensity was a stranger, a visitant from old days when it had waited upon her constantly. But she would not accept it when it came like this, the unheralded offspring of the moment.

"I look like a zany," said she, "beside cousin Katharine and Miss Thayer in their street dress."

"She 's a sweet lady."

"Miss Thayer? Yes, she is a sweet lady."

She drew her hands away and motioned him to a chair. It was a wide one, comfortably cushioned. It had been drawn up before the fire as if its occupant were expected. Her own little stool was near. She longed to take it, and lean her head against his knee. But she had forsworn that, and wisdom counseled her to remember how many times she had sworn and then forgotten. Richard sat there for several minutes not noticing even that she stood. He looked into the fire, and his face dropped into a sadness foreign to its gay simplicity.

"I had a letter from Lorraine to-day," he began at last, in a low tone. Natalie walked round behind him and stood there for a second, to hide her betraying face. Then she came back, threw a stick of wood on the fire, and drew up another chair. The fire caught at the stick, licked it greedily, and burst into flame.

"What did Lorraine say?" she asked.

"It was a queer letter. She never uses your name, Natalie. She always says 'my sister'!"

"Ah, well! that 's natural. What did she have to say about me?"

"One thing — she had n't heard from you for a long time."

"That 's natural enough, too. She does n't write to me."

"But why does she write to *me?*"

"God knows!" returned Natalie, in a tone of enforced lightness. It should have told him much. It betrayed nothing because his mind was not on her, but on himself.

"It 's the queerest state of things I ever came across." He spoke with the emphasis we give to unsolved problems when, to vindicate our astuteness, we dignify the case. "She threw me over. She married the other man. The other man dies after those few years, and she with no pretext, no excuse, begins to write to me again."

"It 's rather like Lorraine," said Natalie, keeping a careful grip on herself.

In all these years of intimacy with another woman's ghost, she had held to the honor of the code. She had not betrayed one of the savage things in her mind, and Richard had not guessed at them.

"No," he went on musingly, "Lorraine never was like anybody else."

"She never was!" the woman's hot mind longed to cry out passionately. "She never hesitated before a barrier, she never withheld her hand from theft or cruelty." But she said only, "I fancy she likes to hear. You write clever letters."

"I think sometimes," said Richard in the same musing tone, "that Lorraine has a kind of loyalty. She knew she did me up pretty well when she broke with me, and I believe she 's sorry. Natalie, old girl, I believe she 's sorry." He reached out his hand without looking at her and she laid hers within it. "Why you 're still cold," he said, and began to chafe the fingers.

"You would like to think so, would n't you?" she asked, with a delusive sweetness in her voice. "You 'd like to think she cared?"

"Yes," said Richard honestly, "I 'd rather think she had a heart. It seems as if Lorraine must have a heart, she 's so amiable. She 's not like anybody else. Why should we expect the same things of her?"

"We should n't," agreed Natalie; "no!" But she drew away her hand, and folded it upon the other across her knees. "Did she say anything about grandmother?"

"Yes, they 're still traveling. Lorraine must lead her a dance. She never could be still, — Lorraine. She wanted life, life."

"So do I," whispered Natalie's imprisoned self, "I want life, life."

"And it 's extraordinary how she manages that old woman. Your grandmother is invincible, just like Lorraine. Yet Lorraine rules her. She rules everybody. She always did."

"Yes, she always did."

There was silence between them, and the fire, in its weaving harmonies, made a pleasant sound.

"What causes that?" asked Richard, suddenly.

"What?"

"How can one woman manage every man she meets?"

"She may be a charming woman."

"Yes, but if she 's not. If you pull her to pieces and find she 's riddled with flaws — not prettier or more sweet. But she makes you do things. How does she bring it about?"

"Sometimes" — she hesitated, and then defiant truth constrained her, — "sometimes it is because she does n't care."

"Care for what?"

"For the man. If she loves herself most, she can manage him. If she loves him" — Something caught her in the throat, and she was silent.

Richard looked at her. For a moment he felt a fragment of the wonder he expended on Lorraine. Immediately he put it aside. There was nothing about Natalie to misunderstand.

"Maybe you 're right." He spoke rather sadly and with a touching gentleness. "No, I don't believe she cared."

Natalie came to her feet with the air of brushing aside that argument and addressing herself to other things.

"I must change my gown," she told him. "The moon is up and they 'll be off without us."

"Natalie!" came Katharine's voice from below stairs. "Children, where are you? It 's almost time."

"Run down," said Natalie. "Keep them talking while I dress."

When he had reached the door, she was still watching him. In spite of herself she called him.

"Richard!" she cried, in a smothered tone.

He turned with an answering query, and she flitted toward him softly as a shadow. She put her arms to his shoulders and her mouth to his. It was not like a maiden, but a wife. "Sweetheart!" she whispered sharply three times, "good-by!" Then before his arms could hold her, she was gone as wraithlike as she came.

"Natalie!" he called, choked with his own response; but she was across the sill of her bedroom and the door was closed.

III

THE HOUSE IN THE WOODS

They were all waiting at the foot of the stairs when Natalie appeared in her short skirt and jacket and her high boots. Furs were close around her throat, and the fur line about her cap came low upon the bright hair. She seemed to have imprisoned herself so, and the glimpse of face between looked pale and cold. She was pulling at her glove, and she looked at that and not at them.

"Hurry!" cried Richard, though for no reason. He was recalling the moment before. It had suggested some passion he remembered as a part of her, and he pondered over its withdrawal.

"You are not going?" asked Elinor, turning to Mannering where he stood, smilingly expansive, his newspaper in hand, by his father's side.

"Not to-night!" he said; "another night!"

Katharine was looking at him with light speculation in her eyes. She knew all these feints at action and withdrawal before the leap. They had ceased to interest her; but she was wondering, with a momentary curiosity, how they would strike Elinor.

"Come on," she said. "We'll take the orchard path."

They went single file along the narrow track, bending their heads at times in obeisance to some lowered bough. Elinor remembered the orchard as it was in summer time. The trees were old, and yet fruitful as in their first estate. The trunks were of a great girth for apple-trees, and now black against the snow. These were ancient high-tops. They spread lavishly above, and the lower branches courted the ground. Sweet shade in summer lived in this orchard, — dark coverts with green boughs near the face; and now it did so assert its strength of growth and fruitfulness that it looked enormous, as if it held long, outer reaches. Elinor recalled its odors in May and the humming of bees there; she saw herself and Katharine walking up and down the bough-broken stillness on June evenings, talking of what they thought they wanted life to be. She seemed to be dwelling in a different season, all sun and flowers; but in a moment she came out of her dream into another where the moonlight lay without on glittering snow, and inside the orchard the trees were inky.

Richard, carrying the snowshoes, had been last in the way; but as they reached the garden beside the Horne house, he plunged out into the drifts and strode ahead.

"I'll wake old Gil," he said. "See him there by the fire, mulling over a book. George! no, he is n't; he 's thinking."

They halted outside the library window and held silence, their gaze upon the man within. Richard looked with some enjoyment, because they were playing a trick, Natalie indifferently. The other two women, secure in their own spiritual solitude, showed each in the darkness a betraying face. Katharine's gained a sudden intensity, as if it reflected many things the man might mean to her. Elinor's lighted with an influx of joy, and involuntarily she put her hand to her throat. Her heart was beating hard.

Gilbert Horne sat there outlined against the light, his head sunken, his book upon his knee. He looked profoundly sad. Katharine, in the midst of her wonder over it, felt a pang of sympathy. Elinor sent him, unwittingly, a vague reproach. He should have been flooded to-night, her unquiet spirit told her, with something of the feeling surging now on her and laving her to the lips. Suddenly he stirred, as a wood animal quivers at a sound. He put up his head and listened. He was aware of them. Then he closed the book and tossed it on the table; as he was rising, Richard broke into a laugh. They tapped on the window in passing, and went without ceremony in at the front door. He met them, genially welcoming.

"You forgot," said Katharine, in a tone of neighborly unconstraint. "We came to remind you. And here is Elinor Thayer."

The meeting seemed significant because it was so still. The two touched hands for a moment without speaking, and Horne looked at the newcomer's face in a wondering way, as if she had walked out of his dream. Elinor had grown paler. Only her eyes were alive, and they included him without seeking him. It had a curious effect, as if he lay in her field of vision, and yet she dared not quite confront him there for fear of some recoil.

"Do you really want to go?" he asked Katharine.

"Of course!" said Richard. "Get your shoes, old Gil. Where are they? Here 's your coat."

"I don't want that. Give me my leather jacket."

He buttoned himself into the jacket, found his cap and gloves, and divided the burden of the snowshoes with Richard. Then he called into the kitchen, where old Sally sat reading her dream-book, and followed the others down the steps and into the road. They went down the hill a space, to a gap in an old stone wall, where they stopped and began to sort out the shoes.

"I 'm afraid I don't remember," said Elinor, when Richard planted a shoe and bade her put her foot on it. "It is years since I tried it."

"You won't find any trouble," said Gilbert Horne. He was strapping Katharine's shoe. "You 'll get the knack of it at once. Dick and I can help you at the walls."

Natalie was walking back and forth in the road until her turn should come, and Gilbert was ready first to help her. Elinor began essaying little trips up and down the snow at the side of the road, and presently they all filed into the pasture, Gilbert keeping beside her. They climbed a knoll topped by a covert of pines, and descended into the smooth splendor of moonlit fields. Elinor at once found the trick of walking, and grew merry over it. Her spirits woke. Something dormant came to life in her, and she breathed the crisp air and loved it. As they struggled up the hill, Horne dropped behind and waited for her.

"This is a change for you," he began, in a commonplace made moving by his tone.

"It 's not like Italy," she answered. "I might never have been away."

"It has been a good many years. You must be wonted to it."

"It 's been nine. If I were ever to be wonted, I ought to be." Something constrained her to add, "But this is home." Yet she would not. Her spirit was as shy as his. She had come here expecting him to be gone. He was here, and she hardly knew how to meet the unsought destiny of it, save with constraint.

Natalie and Richard were fighting like furies, gesticulating, throwing a hastily made snowball, and chasing each other with circumspection, lest they trip.

"You 're a cinnamon bear!" called Natalie.

"You 're a crawling, doddering, hard-shelled tortoise!" yelled Richard.

"Look!" said Katharine, a hand on Elinor's arm, when they touched the crest of the hill. "Talk of your Italy! but look!" The black and white of trees and snow under the moonlight were like the dawning of some strange day. The village was below, a line of tiny lights. There were fields of snow and then great wood patches, and the moonlight came in a flood. Elinor was entranced with the keen sweet air upon her face. She breathed it with some inarticulate thanks for home-coming. After much sorrow and all the years, it seemed like a divine return.

"Look, Elinor!" insisted Katharine. "Look!"

"Yes," said Elinor softly; "I see."

Horne was standing by her side, silent and very near. He, too, was vitally conscious of her. This was the woman he had known briefly in their youth. He had carried the memory of her on in his still life to their maturity, varying with the years. Sometimes she had grown into a woman, always older than he saw her now; sometimes she was an elusive creature compounded of fine qualities; but oftenest she was a girl as he saw her first, with a girl's fragile and potent beauty. He had hardly looked at her since she came back; yet he was keenly alive to her as they stood there together. Suddenly Katharine turned to him with a question that for the last days had been often upon her lips.

"Have you given up Montana?"

They were familiar friends, and yet he was a man whom no one approached very closely. The silence and the night had made her daring; perhaps, too, that illusive splendor of the moon lying on all the faces and giving them a softness not their own. Horne was surprised for the moment, but only because few questioned him. "I shall wait for Dick," he said. "If he won't go, I shall keep on waiting."

"Go along, little brother," cried Natalie, tossing Richard a snow crust; "go to Montana."

"I can't," he said as lightly, tossing back a handful to hit her on the cheek. "Fiske and Bailey are going out of business. I've told you that a million times. You see if I don't buy them out and set up publishing."

"Your grandmother!" scoffed Gilbert Horne. "You come out West and herd cattle with me. Where do we go now, Mrs. Mannering?"

Elinor answered, —

"Through the cathedral woods."

"Do you remember them?" cried Katharine in delight. "But they'll be dark" —

"Yes," said Horne gravely, "we can go." It was exactly as he had used to speak to Elinor, in that other time when they were young.

They went down the hill, and as they walked she tried to put away the thought of him as he used to be, and learn to know him as he was. Richard strangely reminded her of him as he had been in that tremulous time of young desire. Like Richard, he had been a great, perfect creature, though without Richard's easy adjustment to circumstance. He had been shy, serious, much swayed by ideas of duty; and now she found in him some hardening into a manhood she did not understand.

There were two fields to cross, and fences to step over before they came to the entrance of the woods.

"If it were daylight," said Katharine to Elinor, as they went on together, "we should find all manner of little tracks in the snow, and maybe Mr. Horne would tell us what they are. He 's very secretive about such things."

"But he prints them."

"How do you know?"

"I have had his books."

"In Italy?"

"I sent for them," said Elinor.

"Mr. Horne, do you hear?" called Katharine delightedly. "Elinor has had your books in Italy."

He did not answer for a moment. Then he said: "That was very friendly. If I had known" —

"Of course!" said Katharine. "You would have sent them to her. So would I."

But Elinor was supplying the end of the sentence, "If I had known you cared" — and reflecting that this was a thing he never did know.

Natalie had fallen behind with him and he was asking her: —

"You believe in Montana still, don't you? You want Dick to go?" He spoke with the simple gravity that marked their confidences. She could bear his talking about Dick, because he did it as if she had an equal right in him.

"I want it very much," she answered quickly, "if he wants it."

"He did, three weeks ago; but now these fellows have been at him about book publishing, and he wants that."

"He can't do that. He must n't borrow money."

"I could squeeze him out the money, if I thought it wise," said Gilbert, "but I shan't, until he 's had a chance at something different. Don't you see how it would end? He 's a pet and favorite now. He dines with his superiors, his betters, socially. They like him because he 's clever, because he dances well and talks at dinner."

From anybody else Natalie would have resented such analysis, resented it hotly with woman's jealous zeal. But no one could be offended by Horne. He was too impersonal, his motives were too clear. He never interfered with men or women, or was curious over them. When he talked about them at all, it was with a grave, sometimes wistful pondering over what they demanded of him.

"It would be the same old life, I know," said Natalie, — "the same old life."

"Yes. And the West — well, perhaps I 'm visionary about the West. I can't help thinking it 's got room in it, sky spaces, a lot of air. It seems as if it would toughen Dick, and show him values, how to take himself, and all that. It would have been the making of me, I know."

There he stopped short, with that reticence he had when the talk came near himself. Yet it was not so much that as an apparent desire to shuffle out of sight something not worth consideration.

They had reached the lower slope and struck into a cart path not used of late, where the snow, though thinner, lay still untouched. The woods on either side were dark, the trees too close for more than vagrant gleams to penetrate. Their trunks ran straight and tall, and the boughs were vaguely whispering.

"Don't hurry," said Horne; "I 'm going ahead to start a fire."

"There 's a hut in there where Mr. Horne hides when he wants to run away," Katharine explained to Elinor. "We call it the house in the woods."

"I know," said Elinor.

"Was it here in your day?"

"It was just built."

They lingered a little, pointing out glints of moonlight through the pillared aisles; and when they came out on rising ground before the house, Horne had thrown open the door, and within the fire was roaring. It was a log cabin on a knoll. As if it stood in its own garden, the woods about it wore a more delicate look than the outer forest. In a hollow near the rise, spring would show a lighter green, a finer tracery of birch and maple. Tree branches touched the windows, without darkening them too much, even in midsummer, and one great pine littered the roof with needles. Horne had stamped down the snow about the doorstone where they stopped to leave their shoes. The cold air was rushing into the cabin and the hot air from the fireplace met them as it billowed out. The fire was roaring over logs and through a fretwork of pine cones. Horne looked gigantic as he stood there in the light, knocking the fuel into place, and in his haste gave one obstinate log a kick that sent sparks flying up the chimney.

"Take off your jackets," he called. "It 'll be hot as pepper in a minute."

Katharine and Natalie obeyed at once, but Elinor, absently following their lead, looked about her in the firelight, and felt again the strangeness of her return. This too was unchanged. There was the big table in the middle of the room littered with his books and papers, the leather chairs, all luxurious, the big divan by the low square windows, the bookcase lining the wall. To them, it was the house in the woods. To her, it was the house of her dreams. Horne and his nephew were dragging chairs to the fire, and when they were all comfortably disposed in them, there was silence.

"Is n't it strange," said Katharine; "you can't talk down here. I don't know why."

"It is queer," assented Horne; "nobody talks here."

"I do," said Richard. "Uncle Gil, got anything to eat? Crackers, cheese? Anything to drink? Beer?"

"Neither bite nor sup," answered Horne, without regret.

"Pig!" remarked Natalie, incidentally, to Richard. "You ate loads of dinner."

"I 'm not hungry," said he; "but we 're dull. Food promotes good fellowship. Oh, I can talk without it, thank you! Don't you all want to know what

I 'm going to do when I 've bought out Fiske and Bailey ?"

"We 're not particular," said Natalie.

"I want to know," said Elinor.

"I 'll tell you. They need n't listen. I 'm going to take a lot of standard books that have n't any copyright, and make magnificent editions."

"You 'd better come West and learn to ride and shoot straight," said Horne.

"Hark to that, now!" cried Richard admiringly; "listen to the old boy. He 's been dreaming of '49. He wants to sow wild oats of buck-jumping and derringers."

Horne smiled, and moved uneasily with the air of having cogent reasons, difficult to express. His arguments came from his own experience, and that, though anybody was welcome to it, he could not formulate.

"I know the West well enough," continued Richard. "When it comes to riding and shooting, I 'm past master. Besides when I cut stick and go off into the wilds, you whistle me back. Why do you want me to go for good ?"

"We don't want you to go for fun; we mean business," said Gilbert.

"I wish I could go West," said Natalie suddenly. "I wish I were six feet tall, and had a good horse under me, and a prairie to the fore."

"That 's propaganda," remarked Richard wisely. "You mean I ought to want it. You 're pushing me out of the nest. Cheep! cheep!"

"It 's not propaganda. I do wish it."

"Not you. You 'd rather be five feet four and trellised over with lace. You 're nothing but a woman. *You* are, Mrs. Mannering; you 're a Viking, inside. But Natalie! Laws-a-massy! Then, Miss Thayer, I 'm going to discover three geniuses, and publish their first books."

"It does n't cost anything to publish," remarked Horne incidentally.

"Of course it costs something! But I shall borrow, borrow! I shall borrow of you."

"No," said Horne, "oh, no!"

"I shall too, uncle Gil. Don't contradict me before the ladies. Why, how do you suppose Fiske and Bailey have been going on all these years, if there 's no money in it?"

"Why are they going out?" asked Horne.

"Why? Plenty of reasons, good reasons. Fiske is offered a position with Gould and Green, and Bailey 's going to New York."

"Well," concluded Horne quietly, "you go to Montana."

They sat there an hour with occasional slow droppings of talk. Richard grew tired of the stillness, and coaxed Natalie out to climb the hill half a mile away. Then the others covered up the fire and went home as they had come, and Natalie and Dick, breathless, overtook them. The two men said good-night at the Mannering door, and hearing the sound of their voices, Brice pulled up the library curtain and looked out at them. Presently there was a sound of a hen's cluck and cackling, a strange echo of summer on a snowy night. Elinor looked about, bewildered.

"Hens!" she said, "hens!"

Katharine answered her dryly.

"Not hens! — my husband! Those are his accomplishments."

At that moment Brice appeared at the hall door. He had been standing at the crack, discreetly muffled against the cold.

"Is n't that a good imitation, Miss Thayer?" he called. "Ever hear a better? I 've been sitting up for that. I thought I could play it on you."

IV

A CONFIDENCE

THAT night Elinor was sitting by the fire in her own room, lulled by the quietude of the place. At no moment of her stay in the Old World had she felt such tranquillity; here was the earth where her own roots of life had started. The great square chamber with its garlanded paper and old furniture, the firelight playing on the walls, fed her mind and confirmed in it the certainty that this was home. There was a knock, and Katharine opened the door on the heels of her answering call. Katharine looked as if she had come out of some moving experience. Her eyes were large and dark. A vivid red had risen to her cheeks. Her air bespoke a vague excitement.

"What is it?" asked Elinor. She felt the human challenge.

"Don't get up!" Katharine came to the fire and drew up another chair. "Are you tired? Could you talk for half an hour?"

"I 'm not tired at all."

"There are a lot of things I 've got to tell you." Katharine spoke simply, and the glowing of her face seemed to indicate the stress of past decision rather than any existing clash. She leaned back in the low chair and stretched her arms upward, the sleeves dropping away from them and showing their beautiful length. "I 've been dying with impatience for you to come. I want to talk to you about things I don't mention to anybody — except Brice. Though that does n't matter. I 'm going to leave him, Elinor. I 'm going to be free."

"Leave him! leave Brice!"

"I hope so. I 've wanted it for twenty years. I 've prayed for it and hoped and battled; and now I think it 's coming."

She rose in an irrepressible joy, and again stretched her arms above her head. She was transfigured. Such longing, such anticipation were in her face that Elinor caught her breath; the look told volumes of the lean years gone before.

"But, Katharine!" she began, "but, Kate!" Another thought enlightened her and she added, "Then I ought not to be here!"

"Oh, you ought, you ought!" cried Katharine. She sat down again, and began talking with the same intensity, like a child seeking to convince some judicial mind of the validity of its own way. "It 's all quite simple and commonplace. There won't be any tragedy. We shall part friends. I wish him well; I don't ask anything: only to get away from him."

She looked as if she had already got away. Big laboring breaths that were not sorrow, but the anticipation of the life that made such breathing natural crowded upon her, and she would not conquer them. They made her happier. Elinor looked at her in loving wonder. The words were the words of a tragedy, but it seemed a welcome one, and she was amazed.

"I 'll tell you," said Katharine, answering the look. "I want to tell you all about it. You thought I was happy, years ago, when you were here that summer. Did n't you think I was happy?"

"I thought you were fond of Brice."

"I never was. Not for one day nor hour after the first. I was only bewildered. I was trying to fit life — my life — to what I thought it ought to be."

"But you were in love with him."

Katharine threw out her hands with a gesture of sudden passion.

"In love with him! What does that mean? I met him in the spring. There 's a kind of madness in the spring. We share it with the birds. Brice was handsome. Look at his eyes now. They 're beautiful eyes. He quoted classical poetry and looked like a young god, and my blood took fire. But he was n't a god, and I have seen the day when I wanted to drain my veins dry for holding blood like that!" The scorn of the words seemed wholly for herself and her own hateful youth.

"But he was fond of you," said Elinor. She saw herself weakly putting forth a conventional fact to meet most incendiary truth, only to have it burn like stubble and make the truth flame higher.

"He was fond of me — yes! but what did that mean? A short spring madness, like my own. He got used to me very quickly, and settled into a dull jog-trot. We were Darby and Joan. We were to have our dinner at the same time every day, and Brice was to go pottering off to that infernal shop of his at the same minute every morning."

"Dear heart, he had to catch his train!" She smiled. It was a pitying smile, including Brice as well.

"So he did. But don't you see? don't you realize? All his life is like that. It is n't that he 's methodical. He 's nothing else. It 's all small beer. It 's the magnifying of trifles. Why, Nell, the very care with which he has his trousers pressed! it puts a kind of madness into me. I look at that smooth, sharp fold and I want to cut it with my scissors. I look at his boots, and I want to burn them, because I know he has a pair for Wednesday and a pair for Saturday, and I know they are in his closet, the toes all pointing west."

Elinor bent forward and smoothed the firm hand clenched upon the chair-arm. She laughed unwillingly, and Katharine laughed too, though still from inexorable revolt. Her emotion, as she was expressing it, was a passion over childish things, and yet it could not be ignored. It was too real.

"I had one bewildered year," she said, in a voice full of awe over an uncomprehended past. "Then, as women do, I came to the conclusion that things were all wrong and it was my fault. I tried to be dutiful, affectionate, and Brice enjoyed his dinner, and settled into a routine. He took on middle age as creatures take on fat. Then I revolted. I told him we did n't care about each other, and I asked him to let me go away."

"What did he say?"

"He said I was run down, and I must be a good little girl. Then he read the evening paper."

The irony of the prescription struck Elinor. She considered the woman's heroic mould.

"No," said she, "I should n't advise anybody to call you a good little girl."

Katharine did not look at her. For the moment it seemed as if she could not. She had reached a ditch difficult to cross. When she spoke again it was with hesitation and in a low voice. "I might not have told him that, — at least not so soon, not for years; but there was another man."

"Katharine! O Katharine!"

"Oh, I did n't love him! He did n't even think I did. He was a musical person, and he came down here in the summer to rest. He was a sentimentalist — professionally. He told me I was unhappy. I thought it was spiritual insight. It was n't; it was his habit. To have somebody else see my trouble crystallized everything. It shocked me into doing something. That was when I told Brice. Then the man went away, and when he went, he said: 'You 'll remember where to find me. If I can do anything for you, let me know.' I thought he meant it. He did n't. It was a part of the game." She spoke without cynicism, although the words belied her.

Elinor looked at her curiously. Katharine seemed to regard the man as an incident valuable only as he had brought other things to pass.

"I missed Vane Williams. He was the only creature who had shown me any sympathy. I suppose he was the only one who had a formula of sympathy. After he was gone, I stood it two days. Then I went crazy. I had another talk with Brice. And after he had told me to be a good girl, and read his evening paper, I heard him upstairs playing billiards with his father; and once, when he made a good stroke, he cackled like a hen. You heard him to-night. That 's his comedy. Then I went mad all over again. I packed my bag and took the nine o'clock train to town. I was going to New York, to the man who was sorry for me."

"Katharine!"

"Oh, I did n't mean any harm — any more harm than I had in marrying! I thought the man was a great soul. I was sure he would get me something to do. I went to town; and while I stood at the window asking about trains to New York, Gilbert Horne came up."

Elinor started. She had not expected that name. Katharine's voice had altered unaccountably. She seemed softened, humbled, a different woman from the flaming Mænad of the moment past.

"He asked me what the matter was, and I walked away from the window with him and told him. I said it quite honestly. It all seemed very simple. I thought I was dealing with things big enough to justify themselves. He told me I could n't go. He said if I did, he should go with me. Then he talked to me gently and calmly. I don't know what he said. I only knew something broke in me, and I went back."

"Oh, yes! yes!" breathed Elinor. There was triumph in her look. She could fancy how Gilbert Horne would save a woman.

"I went back into bondage. For the moment Gilbert Horne had made it seem like righteousness. I was exalted. I felt I was renouncing something, and I was enough of a woman to think there 's nothing better than renouncing. But it all came on again — the old horror of being here, the hatred of Brice. It was hatred by this time."

"You could have gone away. Why not have done it? By yourself, not to another man?"

"There's the flaw in me," said Katharine, scorning herself. "I was never quite sure I was n't being a coward. Brice seems so incapable of getting on by himself! If he would have agreed with me, if he would have said, 'We will end it,' I could have done it. But there was no money. His bookselling brings in nothing, almost nothing. It's neck and neck. And so I began to write those Sunday-school books — 'Hope Glenwood,' all the rest of them — and what I got out of them went into the housekeeping. And I could n't desert — don't you see? — unless he would have planned and arranged it with me, and talked about ways and means. You see, Elinor, there is n't any money. How could I desert the ship when there's no money?" She wrinkled her brow, and looked appealingly at Elinor, and Elinor saw in her the strange, mixed elements which had made her life go wrong — the child, the woman, the gallant spirit half a boy's.

"But I wanted to be honest," said Katharine. "I was n't even willing to sit at the table with Brice till he knew what I had tried to do. So I told him about running away. I told him about wanting to go to the other man."

"What did he say?"

A look all bitterness ran over her face and curdled it into ugly lines.

"He said, 'Nonsense, Katie, nonsense! Where are you going to plant your hyacinths?' Then he talked about the rotation of crops. He does n't know anything about it, but he likes to think he does. He imagines he's a gentleman farmer. That and a classical scholar. He knows as much about crops as he does about the classics."

"You 're hard on him, Kate."

"I 'm not in the least hard on him. There 's nothing the matter with Brice, except that he 's my husband. If I were visiting here instead of you, I should look on him with a mild kindliness, just as you do, and when he cackles, laugh, and when he is idiotic, find excuses for him. But he 's my husband, Elinor, my husband! He stands for me in the world; he represents me. His failings make me feel a double hatred. They seem to be his and mine together."

"Failings, Kate! Think of mine, think of yours!"

"Ah, but his and mine are not the kind to pair! I can imagine being married to a man with sins, vices, things I sorrowed over and prayed for every day, and adoring him more and more. But there would have to be something big and splendid in him. He could n't be a weakling. I 'm not complaining of Brice, Elinor. Heavens, no! Only he 's a stranger to me, an alien. We 're not alike, we 're not even different with that difference that makes men and women match. We 're nothing! And it 's ball and chain, don't you see? Slavery! Like the dog that kills the duck, and then has to have it tied about his neck."

She seemed, from point to point along her quick discourse, to interpret Elinor's mind even when the other woman had not spoken.

"I know," she said now. "You 're thinking of the horrible taste of this. You 're dwelling on the silent martyrdom of women. Wives die and make no sign. Well, does n't this prove to you that it 's over and done with, all of it? I could be a Nancy Sikes — yes, a Desdemona — but not for Brice Mannering.

No!" She looked like a reckless Valkyr, and Elinor searched perplexedly for something to reply.

"I don't blame you," she said. "I could n't."

"No. Still, you see it 's not an ideal situation. It 's tawdry, threadbare, though it has been enough to drive me very near the things people do in tragedy. But I want to tell you everything that happened after I ran away and came back. When he would n't listen to me, I sat down and wrote a book about it. Yes, I did. I thought I 'd write an honest book about a woman who was tied as I am, and who knew she had a right to be free. I said all the things I wanted to — the things we cover up as if they were indecent. I made the woman wonder how men dare sink back into mere respectable animals. I let her wonder how a man who wants to keep his hearthstone undefiled dares to lay aside all the chivalry and courtesy of his courtship days and rob her of every vestige of beauty he had perjured himself promising her. Then I made the woman braver than I. I had her walk out of the house and go to her lover, and live with him, and live happily. I've shocked you!"

"No! no!" said Elinor. There was pain in her face, but also great compassion. "I 'm only sorry."

"I gave the book to Brice, and he read it half through. He yawned over it. I tried to stir him up. I told him boldly what it was. 'It 's a letter to you, Brice,' I said. 'That 's what I think. That 's what I feel. I feel exactly that about marriage, about our marriage. If I were a braver woman, I should walk away from it as this woman did.' He smiled and said, 'Well! well!' and he never finished it. Then I made up my mind I 'd publish it, to tell other women somebody understood. I showed it to Gilbert Horne."

"Why did you?"

"I don't know. Since that night he brought me home, I'd got a queer obedience to him. I referred everything to him, though we never talked about matters between Brice and me. We never have except that one night. But I asked him to read it, and he would n't let me publish it."

"Why?"

"He said it was immoral. So I threw it into a closet, and there it lies. But that was the last time I tried to let Brice into my life. I separated myself in feeling. I moved over here into this part of the house. I am polite to him. He is polite to me; he always would be. Frankly, Elinor, I don't think he really knows anything is the matter. I fancy he believes I've settled down, in my middle age, and we're going to grow old in peace. But we're not, Elinor; we're not!"

She held the arms of the chair with a grip that made her knuckles white. Elinor, challenged by that unbridled youth and passion, felt old beside her. "My dear!" she said. "My dear old dear! But you began by saying you might be free — what did you mean?"

Katharine bent forward and laid her hand on Elinor's. She spoke slowly, yet with keen insistence.

"Yes! It's true. You see all this time while I've been living here, I never have stopped one instant pushing and pushing him away from me. There's something in it, Elinor, this influencing people. I've tried to rouse that sluggish spirit of his, and make him see he had a right to things, too, as well as I, and he could have them if he got rid of me."

"But he 's comfortable, as you live now!"

"Ah, yes! but don't you suppose I fret and sting him a million times a day? I do. I 've told him so. I 've said, 'You and your father ought to live together. If there was money enough, you could go off to Europe!' And the other day he said in a queer, sly way he has — it 's like a child that 's got a secret — 'We 're going to have some money. If father and I should go to Europe, would you go too?' That means something! it means something!"

To Elinor it meant very little, but she had not the heart to say so. Katharine sat there interrogating her from such passionate eyes that she could only answer gently, —

"What would you do?"

"I 've been getting ready for it; I 've been learning stenography and typewriting. I could support myself — I know I could. I 've even thought if I could get a position I might live in town, and turn in money to help them here. But I can't yet, Elinor, not yet."

Elinor's mind ran back in amazed retrospect over the years of cheerful letter-writing between them. They had known nothing about each other, after all.

"Do you really want me here," she asked at length, "with all this brewing?"

"You 're a godsend. Don't you see you 're the one healthy, human thing, to take us out of ourselves?"

V

OLD LOVE ESTRANGED

Gilbert Horne was finishing his solitary breakfast in the great square room looking out on the orchard. The room was in keeping with a former life — that of the olden time when the house was built. There was a wainscoting, as in every part of the house, and the great fireplace had dogs — Hessian soldiers these, of martial bearing. The low mantel held pewter, and porringers were hung underneath. There was a sideboard, and high-backed chairs were ranged along the wall. The only sign of modern invasion was a plainly built cabinet packed with historic china.

Horne leaned his head upon his hand, and regarded his plate absently. He pushed it back, and Cassie Rhodes, coming in with buckwheat cakes, noted that he was not eating. She was a great creature made out of the best of New England earth. She and her aunt, old Sally, old in nothing save that the neighborhood had known her a long time, carried on the house. Cassie took his plate in the noiseless way of perfect service, and then stood behind him for a moment, watching him with brooding eyes. No mere beauty could be compared to its own advantage with her sturdy health and fitness for the service she had chosen. Her face was fresh-colored and her eyes were brown. She was not quite thirty, but she looked more mature by reason of her size and the serious way she had of taking things. There was great gentleness about her; it was the pliancy of the animal which has been treated kindly. When she spoke, her voice was musical.

"Mr. Horne, aunt Sally says you 're not eating anything."

Gilbert came to life, and began to butter the cakes.

"Never mind aunt Sally. What do you say?" he inquired, cutting into the layered sweetness.

Cassie laughed, a low sound full of content because he had returned to his plate.

"Oh, I don't know," said she, with a happy carelessness. "If folks don't eat one meal, they will the next."

Then she went off into the kitchen, and Gilbert heard her caroling the desolate minor of "Hearken, Ye Sprightly" in the jocund measure of a heart at ease. Or he would have heard it, except that his ear took no conscious note of the two women who made his life run in an even groove. They were so truly a part of his ways that he regarded them hardly more than the bread he ate. Presently the door opened and Sally appeared, to make sure that breakfast was going well. She paused in the doorway and asked in a crisp staccato, —

"More cakes?"

"No," said Gilbert, — "no, thank you, Sally." But her face dropped a trifle, and he added yieldingly, "Well, one more; one or two!"

Sally grunted in a way she had, more than half Indian, and went stiffly out with his plate. In due time she returned, and stood for a moment as her niece had done, enjoying him and his appetite. He was a man, a helpless creature needing service from the breast to the tomb, and her old glance mothered him. Sally and her niece seemed to have no kinship of blood, as to the outer woman. Cassie had been made from the earth's abundance, and Sally was little and dry, with long arms and a halting foot. Her lameness was a mystery to others. It gave her no trouble, she said. It never hurt. She could do a woman's work and ask no odds of anybody. It seemed an intrinsic part of her, and no one thought of pity. She had a delicate face with a sharp nose and little lace-like wrinkles everywhere. Her eyes were black, as keen as needles, and she had a mass of iron-gray, curling hair.

"You must n't git into the way o' not eatin'," she said incidentally.

Gilbert had finished his cakes. "Sit down a minute, Sally," said he, pushing back his chair. "You 've cleaned the garret?"

Sally had not sat down. She watched him narrowly. There was even something satirical in her gaze.

"It 's as clean as a ribbin," she said. "I took them two warm days for 't."

Gilbert passed his hand over his forehead, and looked embarrassed. When he spoke again, it was not with his usual direct assurance. His purpose seemed to be wavering behind the words.

"I thought I could pack my papers into cases, and put them up there under the eaves. Some I should leave in the library with the books; but some" —

Sally took up a teaspoon and regarded the bowl mirthfully. Then she turned it over and, seeing a trace of black about the marking, she frowned. But the smile returned, and wrinkled up the network about her eyes until they disappeared within. Gilbert, moved by the silence, glanced up at her, and caught the smile.

"What are you laughing at, you irritating old Cheshire cat?" he asked, with the violence of a detected man.

Sally said nothing, but smiled the more.

"I know what you think," said Horne fractiously. "You think I never meant to go away at all. You think when I talked about Montana, I did it for the fun of planning how you and Cassie might live along here — oh, go away with you!"

Sally began picking up the dishes with great deftness. She looked innocently conscious of knowing more than she told.

"Come now," said Horne, himself beginning to smile, "you speak, Sally, or I shall do murder. You would n't want me to brain you with a fire-shovel. Speak out, you catamount! Do you think I never meant to go West at all?"

"Yes," said Sally smoothly, "I guess you meant to."

"But you don't think I mean to now?"

"No," said Sally, "you ain't a-goin'. I knew it when I waked up this mornin'. Cassie knew it, too. 'He won't go, aunt Sally,' says she. 'He won't go.' She come downstairs singin' like a bird. No, you won't go. But it 's all clean up garret, if you want to pack away."

She disappeared haltingly into the kitchen, and when the door was opened Gilbert heard a gush of "Hearken, Ye Sprightly," as if it had escaped and flown into the room. Presently a thin voice, like a cicada, joined the melody, and then it stopped and both the women laughed. Horne knew they were delighted at Sally's invasion of the tune, but it seemed for the instant as if every one were scoffing at his own infirmity of purpose.

"Infernal nuisances!" he growled; and went off into the library, knowing he loved them well.

He wandered about the room like a man given an unexpected holiday, doing the little things that make a luxury of daily being. He laid a log on the fire, and drew the curtains to a careful line. Then he sat down in his chair by the hearthstone, and let the peace of freedom sink into him. These two women had illuminated his inability to tear himself up by the roots and transplant himself into a new country. He had been going for Richard's sake, and Richard had refused to go; now he was penetrated by gratitude at the reprieve. Looking about on his own walls, he found them comforting, and sank further into the reverie that belongs by right not to the beginning of the day but to darkness. He remembered Elinor and gave up to thinking of her, as he had not for many years. She was the dream of his youth, at first attended by sharp pangs of longing and quick reprisals, and then dulling a little, like a dream, and, still like a dream, relegated to the region where the unreal lurks and beseeches us. He had fallen into the habit of thinking he had loved her, and that through his own infirmity of purpose and the hard circumstances which together make what we call destiny, he had lost her. Now she stepped out of the dream again, a girl grown to a woman, and with a strange, untouched beauty he had seen in no one else. She bewildered him. He felt, in spite of his shyness, an urgent curiosity about her, not as she regarded him, for he did not expect her to regard him at all, but as the creature she was, harmonious, full of mystery. To his humble mind there was no likelihood that his young fondness had been a mutual thing. He could remember how she enslaved him and how he haunted her; but he never guessed that the girl also had her sweet, shy passion. As if his thought of her had been a summons, he saw her walking by, and with a keen impulse he took his hat and coat, and ran down the snowy path into the road.

"I thought you were in town," she greeted him.

"Why?"

"You said you were going on the early train."

"I know it. I backslid. I don't care much about the town. Where are you bound now?"

"To the five pines. Kate is busy. I wanted to look up old landmarks."

He fell into step with her, without debating whether she wanted him. It was at once as simply desirable a thing to be together as it had been years ago. One thought was in both their minds. This was exactly what he had used to do: to take his cap and run after her when he saw her out of doors.

"It 's no weather for the five pines," he said.

"I know it. But I remember what they are in summer. They are on your land, are n't they? Nobody can cut them down."

"Nobody ever will, in my day."

Gilbert at once felt a lightness of spirit quite amazing to him. He had learned to be content with very little; to take pale satisfactions and call them pleasures because it was well to do so. Throughout his mother's invalid life, he was conscious of a relief when the days were more serene than usual: when she was neither hysterical, nor remorseful over yesterday's hysteria. Then there was the moderate joy of getting off alone into the woods, and learning to own his soul again before he came back and gave it away all over, with willing aches of puzzled service. But now, as they walked away together, he had that quickened sense of being due only to completion.

"I have been jeered at by my family, this morning," said he. Elinor glanced at him and saw how much younger he looked than he had the night before. The daylight had not betrayed — it was revealing him. "Old Sally; — she 's my family; she and her niece."

"I remember Sally. She was old then. The niece I never saw."

"I want Dick to go West with me, you know; but he won't and I 'm glad, infernally glad. I settled down this morning into my gladness. I knew I was safe for a few weeks at least, till I can persuade him. But Sally detected me. She thinks I never meant to go at all."

"But you did. Kate wrote me about it weeks ago. Then you were going at once."

"I was. But Dick failed me. I did n't want to go then. I had to screw my courage up."

"Entirely for him?"

"Partly for him, partly for me. When my mother died, I was perfectly aware that I 'd got to go somewhere. I thought of Europe, but frankly I did n't want it. Then when I got the idea that the West was the thing for Dick, it seemed as if it might do for me."

"Yes, I understand."

He interpreted her thought.

"No," said he quickly, "you don't. You think I wanted change because I was in grief after my mother's death. That is n't it at all. I saw what a poor thing I 'd grown to be settling down here heavier and heavier year after year. I saw I 'd got to tear myself up by the roots, unless I meant to grow gnarly and knotty and worm-eaten. I 'd got to knock about. The time is past when it 'll do any real good, but a change might keep my blood going. Still I should hate it."

"You 'd rather stay here?"

"Right here, like a tree. My youth is gone. I 'd like to have the rain rain on me and the sun shine, and let me grow old in peace."

The words gave her a vague and unaccountable pain. For herself, she had never thought much about age, save that if it came before he saw her, he might be disappointed. There were moments when she had been heart-sickeningly jealous of the girl she was. But in his maturer strength, he looked invulnerable, and she recoiled indignantly at the thought of his renouncing life as other men had found it.

"Well, why not?" she said, answering in the way women have when their minds are bitterest and must not be betrayed. "Why not grow old in peace?"

"I don't know," said he, almost fractiously, "but you can't. Somehow we are stung with this everlasting desire to knead over the stuff we are made of. I 'm a coward. I 'm afraid of ordinary life. I always have been, when I let myself think. And I 'm harried night and day with the necessity of making myself more like other men." Then he laughed. "You are just the same, are n't you?" said he. "'Open locks, whoever knocks.'"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, you don't say much; you only listen. Yet as soon as I am with you I open my mouth and talk, and I have n't talked about myself to anybody since you went away. It 's a fact. Nothing has seemed important enough. But here you are, dragging it all out again."

The blood rose to her cheeks, deepening the flush brought by the wintry day. Her eyes took on happiness. She forgot the years that lay behind them, and forgot his talk of age.

"Race you to the pines!" she dared him. He started, giving her chivalrous odds; but she ran so hard and fast that competition entered into him and he raced her fairly. He beat, and she came up panting, the blood pumping more color into her cheeks and brightness into her eyes.

"Don't talk about old age," she cried. "We 're alive and this is old New England. That 's enough."

VI

HEARTS INSPIRED

Elinor came downstairs that night after dinner and found Brice and his father in their places by the fire. Mannering had the paper, and his father, the unread volume of Homer in his hand, was always drowsing off. Brice solicitously got her a chair.

"Have you seen the paper?" he asked; but she took a book and began a pretense of reading, not to break in upon their hour. She felt like a spy, with this double consciousness of what Brice ordinarily seemed and what he seemed to his wife. Presently Katharine came in and made a stir in the air. Elinor roused under her aggressive vitality; but the two men were impervious to it. They were used to her, as eyes grow dulled to mountains and the sea.

"I think," said the captain, bestirring himself, after half an hour's comfortable somnolence, "that I shall take a little constitutional on the veranda. No! my boy, no! no! I 'll get my hat and coat."

But Brice sprang to his feet, and put an affectionate hand through his father's arm. They went out of the room together looking amazingly alike, more from some subtile inner resemblance than any chance of line and color.

Katharine was watching Elinor, and now she spoke impulsively.

"I 'm sorry I told you about Brice and me. It worries you."

"Well," said Elinor, with a wrinkled brow, "does n't it worry you?"

"Yes; but that 's different. You 've let it eat into you. It 's spoiling your visit."

Elinor could not deny it.

"I am chiefly uncomfortable," she owned, "at knowing something Brice would n't want me to know. I feel like an impostor."

"Bless you, *he* would n't mind! Why, I 'll tell him. Brice!" He had left his father on the veranda, and was coming in again.

"Don't take your paper," said Katharine, as he seated himself and stretched out a foot toward the fire. "I want to tell you something. I 've been explaining things to Elinor: about you and me, Brice. I tell her we don't want to live together."

Elinor felt herself crimsoning. But Brice vouchsafed a hearty little laugh.

"Well! well!" said he; "now, have you really?"

Katharine spoke eagerly. She leaned toward him as if she were persuading him.

"Don't you see, Brice? I wanted her to know, because she 's going to be here with us. I wanted her to understand. And it 's true, is n't it? We 're not like other married people, are we? We both want to be free." She seemed to be demanding a most excellent thing, but Brice received it as if she asked for an absurd one.

"Just the same, is n't she?" he said to Elinor with what seemed to her an indulgent fondness; "same old Katie!"

"Oh, Brice, you 're like a blank wall!" cried Katharine, as if she would strike him. "Tell her the truth! Tell her what you told me the other day. You said you were going to make money. You said you might go abroad to live, you and your father."

He settled back in his chair, a slow smile creeping over his face. He was not beautified by his smile. It was self-important, fatuous. "It 's something of a surprise," he said to Elinor, in a gigantic aside. "I 've got a surprise for her."

But as Katharine leaned drearily back in her chair, he repented and turned the paper toward her. "Look at that!" he said in triumph. "Read that!" It was an advertisement in letters two inches long; it took the entire space across the page.

"'Hearts Inspired,'" read Katharine, with no great interest. "What is it? A new book? A novel? Published by — by *you*, Brice? You don't publish books."

"I am publishing this one," declared Mannering, with an assurance verging on bravado. "Why should not I publish a book?"

"But how can you? How can you afford it? Where 's the money for printing, advertising? Heavens, Brice, you 've got to advertise!"

Brice took the paper and folded it, so that the letters stared him in the face. He looked at them lovingly, as one who had created them.

"I am advertising," he said.

"But how? — how? Why, we have n't paid for the cistern yet!"

The air seemed too warm for non-combatants, and Elinor got softly up to leave the room. But Brice rose at the same moment, and made a gesture to detain her.

"Don't go," he said. "This is n't all. I want you to hear the rest."

She sat down again, under some graceful protest, and he remained standing. He looked triumphant, and Katharine stared at him.

"It 's your book," he said to her, as if he made her a present.

"My book?"

"The book you wrote so long ago, and gave to me to read." He said it with the air of a child who has done well.

Katharine rose also and faced him, a hand on the back of her chair. A slow red crept into her cheeks. Her eyes burned upon him.

"What book? The story of the woman who left her husband?"

"Yes."

"It had no name!"

He chuckled. "I named it."

"You refused to read it, at the time. You have taken it down out of the garret, and you are publishing it?"

Now Elinor rose again, and neither of them detained her. When she went out she shut the door, and they heard her presently pacing up and down the veranda with Captain Mannering. Content was regnant in Mannering's eyes. He looked like a person who has done an exceedingly good thing.

"I knew I should surprise you," he said, again with a chuckle.

"Surprise me! Brice, it is my book. You can't tamper with it."

Mannering at that moment remembered other tempests in that very room, when she had told him it was not the trammels of marriage she hated: that it was the individual bond. To a man who could master her, she had said, she would gladly yield. The time would come, he had always felt, when he could justify himself and quell her scorn of him.

"I have advertised the book," he said, with a decision so unnatural that, even to her, it sounded ominous. "I might as well tell you, it is in print. I brought you home a copy." He went to a drawer in the desk, and drew forth a book, well bound, of a comfortable size.

She put out a mechanical hand, and took it. She turned the leaves — it was well printed. Familiar phrases caught her eye. Here was power, there was conventional twaddle. She was afraid to look further. Closing the book, she stood holding it in one hand, and gazed past Mannering out of the window. The extremity of her anger frightened her. It seemed to presage some bodily convulsion. And all the time Mannering stood looking at her with the fatuous smile she knew from memory. When she spoke, her voice was rather dry, but almost unconcerned. It, like all her bodily forces, seemed to be on the point of escaping her control.

"The manuscript had no name. You say you named it?"

"Yes. Good title, is n't it? Capital selling title!"

"You did n't announce it beforehand. Why?"

"I 'm springing it on the public," said Mannering, with the same air of swaggering sufficiency. "I might have announced it, if I 'd been willing to wait;

but the fact is, the whole thing is rather sudden. I only thought of it six weeks ago. I rushed it through."

"You rushed it through! You knew I would forbid it."

He was recovering his ordinary poise in the relief of finding her calm. He laughed a little, the shallow mirth she hated.

"Well," said he, "the fact is, Horne" —

"You talked to him about it?"

"I remembered you said he 'd read it, and I asked him what he thought. He said, no, it must n't go into print; said it was immoral." Again he laughed.

"So that determined you?"

"For God's sake, Kate, don't be unreasonable! He said it would be considered so — considered so, you know, and it was n't fair to you. So I did n't use your name. Look at the title-page. You have n't thought of that. It 's anonymous, Kate, anonymous."

Katharine did not look at the title-page. She went to the fire, and began stripping out the leaves of the book and showering them in the blaze. She was quite white now, and her eyes were deadly. Mannering, fascinated, watched the inexorable movement of her hands. At last, she laid the cover on the flames, and they licked the fine gilt title, "Hearts Inspired." Brice shrank a little. He was afraid of her temperament, its intensity, its vividness. All her emotions seemed so disproportionate to life, as he saw it. With her, he had the feeling sometimes awakened by the insane; it was impossible to tell when she would break out next. At that moment there was the stillness that implies a moral hush; but a voice ringing and full of cheer broke in upon it. Richard Horne had come.

"Hullo, Mannering! you 're a great one, are n't you? You 've painted the town red. Seen the book, Mrs. Mannering?"

Katharine turned slowly toward him, and the tension of her hand upon the chair relaxed. Mannering felt the going down of the storm, and sank into his seat, at ease. He had a simple faith that when a tempest seemed to be over, it really was.

"So the book is out," said Katharine, with a delusive sweetness.

Richard followed her lead, and sat down.

"Yes," he said, "out! He 's painted the town. You 're a great old boy for keeping a secret, Mannering. What made you do it that way?"

Mannering had gathered his self-importance about him like a mantle. It seemed to him that he had done a very good thing indeed, and that trade was about to recognize it. It could not but be apparent to him that he was sometimes ignored in this little world; but now at last his own self-estimate was justified.

"I had reasons," he said, — "reasons."

Richard's glance fell upon the shriveling cover, and his face took on a droll surprise.

"Why — Jove!" he said, "you 're burning it up."

"Yes," said Katharine smoothly; "a defective copy."

She had lost her rich color, the red of anger. Her face had fallen into a dull white, and certain lines were graven there. Mannering did not look at her, but he showed an airy pleasure. The cloud, he thought, had passed.

"I'll tell you all about it, Richard," he said affably. "The fact is, this manuscript, this most extraordinary manuscript, came into my hands, and I concluded to publish it. I 'm going to advertise it — widely."

"Well, it 's about as wide as anything can be now," said Richard, — "evening papers full of it, street cars bombarded, piles on the news-stands. Oh, you 'll get there, Mannering! But have n't you got the cheek!"

"I hope so, my boy," said Mannering confidently; "I hope so. If you spend money enough on a book, you can make it go. This is a remarkable book, and it 's going."

Katharine rose at the word, and both men with her. When she had passed the threshold, Mannering turned to Richard.

"Now, my boy," he said heartily, "sit down, and I 'll tell you what I propose to do about the book."

VII

REVOLT

KATHARINE went to the outer door and threw it open. She stood there for a moment, swept by the cold air, and yet not feeling it. Still burning with anger, she shuddered under its rush and onset. A double footfall sounded from the side veranda, where Captain Mannering was pacing up and down with Elinor; there was the murmur of Elinor's voice. That recalled her.

"Elinor!" she cried sharply. "Elinor!"

The steps halted for an instant, and then Elinor came hurrying round the corner. Katharine drew her into the house.

"Come upstairs," she said imperatively. "Get your things off." She went on in advance, and walked into Elinor's room, where a fire was burning softly in the wintry dusk. Katharine pointed to the chair by the hearth. "Sit down," she said. "I can't rest. I must talk. Elinor, did you hear him? He has published that book — my book."

"It is incredible. But what can you do? It is too late."

"It is not too late to rage!" said Katharine, her eyes hot, her cheeks ablaze. "Elinor, I hate this anger. It 's like murder."

Elinor got up and went to her. She took Katharine's wrists and held them still. For herself, she seemed at once to be a different creature. Her pretty, facile droop was gone. This was the woman who had acted for other people all her life, thought for them, controlled them, and denied herself.

"Come and sit down," she said. "Don't waste yourself so. There 's no good in that."

Katharine let herself be led to the chair and sank into it, clasping her knees in the attitude of brooding. She spoke incisively, as if she cut the words with her teeth.

"That is how he proposes to make money, — out of my book. Don't you see the immorality of our living here together? Don't you see we are like strangers? No! for strangers don't hate each other."

Elinor was a hot-blooded creature of another kind, who had long ago sought to make herself dispassionate.

"Brice does n't hate you," she said. "He has wronged you in this, horribly, but he has n't meant to. He does n't hate you, Kate."

Katharine drew back her lips until the white line of her teeth lay bare.

"But I hate him," she said, with a coldness that stung. "If it is n't hatred, I don't know what hatred is. His look, his voice, the way he walks, — they make me shudder. And yet there 's nothing wrong about him. It 's because he has lived with me, because he is called my husband, that he seems in a strange, awful way to be a hideous travesty of myself. Elinor! Elinor!" She put her hands before her face, and began sobbing in a dry, tempestuous fashion more rending than any tears. Elinor rose, and in her turn walked up and down the floor. She was too wise to essay soft touches, in the ordinary way of woman's comforting.

"You 've got to be just to him, Kate," she said at last, when Katharine leaned back in her chair and looked at the fire with haggard eyes. . "He does n't mean any harm."

"That 's a part of it. I have married a man who does a colossal dishonesty without meaning any harm."

"That 's your vanity; that 's pride."

"It *is* pride. Pride is n't a bad thing. Don't be hard on me, Nell."

Elinor stopped in her slow walk, and sank for a moment on her knees beside her friend. She gazed up into Katharine's face, and her own look was one of pure and earnest love. "Hard!" she repeated. "Hard! I only want you to be just."

But Katharine scarcely saw her except as an impersonal something, who would hear her speak. She gave her a little absent touch on the arm, as if to bid her be at peace, and Elinor rose and took the chair opposite. Katharine began collectedly, as if she made her own defense at some tribunal.

"I do not understand this — marriage. I have never understood it. When we are so young that all the world looks fresh and green, and every leaf has dew on it, we make a bargain. We make it with our souls — our outraged souls. Then they turn and plead to us, our poor souls. They beg us to be free. We ask the church to let us go. We ask the law. The church and the law say, 'If you have broken your oath, you may go. If you have injured each other, if you have been unclean, full of hatred, eaten up by malice, you may go. But if you have tried to fulfill your bond even while you hated it, you shall not go; if you have tried to be just, courteous, forbearing, still longing to escape, you shall not go.' Elinor"—she looked up with a most pathetic earnestness—"Elinor, I don't hate him. I would n't hurt him. I only want to go."

"No! no! you don't hate him. You could n't. But, Kate, we can't escape. We are not the only ones concerned. There are other people."

Katharine's face flamed.

"Is it better for other people?" she asked passionately. "Is it better for me to lie and lie, every day, all my life? To say this is an honorable estate I am living in, whereas I consider it from the first a great dishonor? To smile and say 'my husband,' when we are strangers? Elinor, there should be an honorable discharge. There should be a tribunal of good men and true who would sit down and judge whether two people who have not committed unclean things should still live together in bondage." She listened. "Hark! Richard is going. I must go down, dear. I must see Brice alone." She hurried out of the room on the closing of the hall door, and Elinor heard her flying down the stairs.

The Captain had come in, and he stood with his son before the fire. He was laughing softly, the senile mirth of an unmeaning age, and Brice, his hand on his father's shoulder, was looking into the fire, smiling. Katharine reflected, as she entered, that it was easy for him to indulge a creature whose habits, sins, and pleasures were his own.

"Brice," she said, "may I see you a minute? Will you come into the dining-room?"

The two men turned as one, and the captain noted her pale face.

"Has anything happened?" he asked solicitously.

"No," said Katharine, in a monotone we accord those who have no right to question us, "nothing new. Brice, may I see you?" In spite of his son's detaining hand, the old man stepped away from the fire, and making a little bow, went out, taking his Homer with him. He was not curious. He, like his son, regarded Katharine as a problem not really on the whole worth solving, but very agreeable in spite of all. Having great ascendency over creature comforts, she was not bad to live with.

She came forward with a specious appearance of calm, and took one of the chairs by the fire.

"Sit down, Brice," she said. "Please sit down." She had made brief resolutions on the way downstairs. Anger was beside her purpose; she would not show it.

Brice, also, had been resolving: but his determination was not the affair of the moment. It had grown up in him from year to year. It was the culmination of days wherein he had felt the goad of her aversion, her purpose to escape. She had scorned him for having no initiative, and in the manner of a slow nature, he had stored the insults until now they were a force to work with. This moment was his justification for the past. He braced himself for the onset, and knew he should not yield. But it seemed as if he might relinquish an advantage in sitting down, and he stood with one hand on the mantel, regarding her.

"Brice," said Katharine, "we must give this up." She spoke with an extreme gentleness, the reaction from her anger. But such quietude armed him anew. He shifted to the other foot, and took a better pose. "I can't give it up," he said firmly. "The book is out."

"It is under your control."

"Not now. The dealers have got it. It 's on the news-stands. I 've sent four hundred copies for review."

Katharine looked at him with speculation in her eyes. He seemed a different creature. Under the impact of the moment, even his face had changed. It looked younger, full of purpose: whether a good purpose or a bad, it did not tell.

"Brice," said she curiously, "did it occur to you that this was my book?"

The dispassionate fall of her voice misled him. It bespoke interest and nothing more.

"I was acting for you, Katie," he said, with some patronage.

"But you left me in the dark. Why did you do that?"

Mannering was not altogether sure why he did that. For a moment he hesitated, held by an honest perplexity. He had a glimmering sense that it would have been impossible to act with her concurrence. All their married life he had been much criticised, in a courteous way; it had been taken for granted that in practical exigencies he was certain to do wrong. It was true that his methods were not always those in ordinary use, but, as he judged, it was their originality that rendered them desirable. He had gained the slyness of the weak, or the man fed to surfeit on rebuffs. Since his actions never met with approval, he had long ago taken the safe road of silence. But all this unformulated data from the past only gave him a confused feeling that it had been impossible to share his purposes.

"I was acting for you," he repeated, and the words seemed to him adequate; he said them firmly.

Katharine was looking at him in a puzzled musing new to her.

"Brice," she said at last, "I don't know you in the least. After all the years we 've been together, I don't know you."

He drew himself up slightly. It was easier to carry through the interview than he had hoped. She was accepting him in his new part, and with a facility he had never dared expect.

Katharine sat still a moment looking at the dying fire, conscious of an undercurrent of fear lest he should throw on more wood. He and his father were always building up crackling blazes, as unsatisfying as the brawling of a shallow stream. Yet this was only one of the things she hated because her husband liked them.

"Brice," she asked at length, the more gently as the situation puzzled her the more, "why did n't you put my name on the title-page?"

It was an innocent question meant to illuminate the crannies of his mind; but he discovered some personal pique in it, and smiled. He began to scent her interest, even a possible partnership. Now he took his chair, and sat down to confidential talk.

"Well, you know, Katie," said he, "that 's really a dodge. It piques curiosity, don't you see? In another edition" —

"No! no!" She foresaw him introducing her to the reading world. This was his book. His wife had written it. He had cleverly printed it. But she remembered in a flash how crude it was, how young and foolish. There would be no more editions. "You must not do that, Brice," she said, with a careful patience calculated to impress him. "My name must not be connected with it in any way."

"Oh, very well! very well! You may be right. Mystery is a good card — good as any."

"And, Brice, the book — the copies out now — they must be recalled."

He laughed in tolerance over her simplicity. "Bless you, child," said he, "they can't be. Why, they 're everywhere. They 're broadcast. You might as well recall dandelion seeds after they 've begun to fly. Or milkweed. Milkweed, now! Do you know what Horne says in his 'Green Boughs' about milkweed? Says it 's good for greens, the young tips. Actually! I came on the paragraph yesterday."

Katharine narrowed her eyes, in intensity of reflection. But she did not look at him. Her gaze took in the fire-dogs and the embers.

"Brice," said she at last, "you have been extremely clever."

"That 's awfully nice of you, Katie," he said honestly. "I fancy I have, but I did n't know you 'd take it so." He bent over to kiss her, in reward, but even the well-meaning peck of marital approval seemed tragically significant. She pushed her chair back, and rose violently.

"No! no!" she cried, too sharply for the present situation, but with a meaning that included all their past. "No! no!"

Mannering looked a little discomfited, but only a little. He had a way of referring her onsets and withdrawals to the general madness of womankind; he never considered them the response of the particular woman to the particular man.

"You 're a funny girl!" he said lightly, and picked up the evening paper. There the advertisement took his eye again, and he regarded it lovingly. Katharine rose, and stood for a moment thinking, her gaze on the fire. Then she turned slowly toward the door.

"I must talk to Mr. Horne about it," she said, in a reflectiveness meant for herself alone, yet so innocent that it included Brice. But he laid down his paper, and took a forward step.

"No, Kate," he said lightly, but with some hidden authority. "Don't do that."

The significance of his tone arrested her. "Why?" she asked.

He was still smiling, and his voice had the airiness of those who are disguising an unwelcome meaning under a graceful finish.

"Oh," said he, "nothing! Only I shall be jealous of Horne."

Yet he was only taking into account Horne's power, the inevitable effect of the man's will when he really brought it to bear. Horne never interfered in life save when he was forced into the fray by some most imperative call; then he was a trenchant foe.

Katharine was looking at him in a culminating amazement. An added color came into her cheeks.

"I am ashamed," she said, "ashamed!"

Then she went upstairs.

VIII

GUESTS

NEXT morning at the breakfast table there was little talk. Katharine, her cheeks scarlet and her lips a scornful line, sat behind the urn and dispensed housewifely favors with a careful hand. Brice had trebled his suavity. He had the conciliatory air of a dog in disgrace, and Katharine's lightest civility evoked his deference. When he left the table she followed him to the library whither he had gone to fold his muffler by the fire.

"Brice," said she, "that book must be suppressed."

Last night's tacit victory had heartened him. Brusqueness had served him then, and remembering that, he stood the more firmly on his feet and answered, —

"It can't be. The country 's flooded with it."

A thought struck her, ineffectual until now in the spiritual impact of the case. She voiced it without preamble.

"Where did you get your money?"

His eyelids quivered, and his face grew gray.

"Advertising takes money," she said, emboldened. "Where did you get it?"

The spirit had gone out of him. The old tone of blustering weakness broke forth waveringly, and he besought her, —

"Katie, you let me manage this thing in my own way. We 're in difficulties."

"We? What do you mean? The shop? The business?"

Even his look was querulous. He wanted her to understand without the necessity of explaining. His own ideal of marriage would have implied a mate who never questioned, never criticised, but held herself in readiness to smooth the brow.

"We 're in difficulties," he said. "We owe money, — money we can't pay."

"Did you borrow it?"

He retired behind the one defensive word.

"Yes," he said, "I — borrowed it."

"What became of it?" she asked, with a merciless directness.

He flew into fractious passion. "Heavens, Kate," he cried, "what does become of money? I can't account for everything we 've had in the last twenty years."

"I can account for everything I 've had," she said, with the bitterness sprung from those old grudges that, silently endured, still burn and aggregate, — "food, clothes. What else?"

"We have lived well," he said assertively.

"We have lived from hand to mouth. Sometimes I think you don't know how much pains it has taken to keep up the house and give you the table you liked — you and your father."

"That 's it," he said eagerly. "It 's a big place. We 've had to keep it up."

Light dawned on her.

"Is it possible," she said, "that I 've been a fool?

All this dickering in horses and cattle, this buying machinery for the farm — has that taken money?"

Mannering looked at her from the heights forever destined to overtop feminine incapacity.

"What else did you think?" he asked.

"I must have been a fool," said Katharine, less to him than to herself. "I have looked on from the outside. I had a pictorial view of it. I should have said you were a person with a genius for trading. I fancied you made a little here and lost a little there. I dare say you have squandered money like water." It was a dispassionate accusation. The words stung, but he could not resent them. They were too cold. "I see," she said slowly, "I see. You are in debt. You saw the emotional possibilities of this book. You snatched at it like a desperate speculation. You borrowed money to float it. You are speculating in my brains — no, not my brains. There 's no brain in the book — but there 's blood." She stood looking past him in a painful musing. He watched her uneasily, thankful that, for the moment, her rage had not engulfed them. "Well," she said at length, "you can at least sell the house."

It roused him.

"Sell the house!" he repeated. "It would break my father's heart."

She had always preserved the outer decencies of speech, but at that moment she wished to say, "Your father has no heart to be broken." Instead she contemplated the situation. "You want to go abroad with him. If he is abroad, he won't miss it."

Brice was at once alert.

"He must have it to come home to," he said decisively. "My father never shall see that roof sold over his head."

"It must be sold."

"It can't be sold. It can't, I tell you."

"Why?"

"If you must know, it's mortgaged."

"Mortgaged! It can't be. You'd have had to get my consent."

"You gave your signature."

"Never! I never did."

"It was five years after we were married. It was one evening. Vane Williams was playing at the piano. You were listening. I brought it in and said: 'Here's a paper for you to sign.' You signed it."

"Without reading it?"

"You did n't ask to read it. You used to go into a kind of trance when Vane Williams played." This was no covert flout. He had never regarded the trance as indicating another man's emotional ascendency: it was only a medium for getting her signature without troublesome talk.

"To whom is it mortgaged?"

"Gilbert Horne."

She started, and her muscles weakened.

"Has the interest been paid?"

"Almost always."

"That means not at all — or not for years." She stood brooding on vacancy, and he seized the moment.

"Good heavens!" cried Mannering fractiously. "I shan't get that train!" He was gone in a great flurry of reproachful haste, and Katharine went slowly into the dining-room, where Elinor stood by the window watching the winter birds.

"Nell," said Katharine, "Brice is too clever for me."

"How is he too clever?"

"I have despised Brice all my life; but now, when there 's actual warfare between us, he is bound to defeat me. His method is so simple. He is like a man standing still in one place, and hammering away with his eyes bandaged. My eyes are n't bandaged: so I get dazzled by the sunlight and one or two odd things. But Brice never varies."

Even up to this point Elinor had not been sure how far she might concern herself with married yoke-fellows.

"I should have said the power lay with you," she ventured.

"So should I. But we were wrong. He is n't deterred by any scruples. He has embarked on a course — no, he has set off trotting along in a rut — and he is going to stick there. Indeed, he can't get out of it. But the curious part of it is, Elinor, — for the first time in all these years, he has roused in me some idea of the community of interest between us."

"You are nearer together?"

"Not an inch nearer together. You 'd have to go back to the beginning of time and abolish race differences, to bring us nearer together. But somehow this clogging contract holds. When you pay no attention to it, it seems to be a thing of air. Disturb it by a breath, and it wakes and lays a cruel hand upon you."

"I don't understand, Kate. You 'll have to tell me plainer."

"I can't. Brice has been talking to me about money difficulties. I know his reason for this grotesque scheme of making money by the book. It is n't that I sympathize with him in the least. It 's only that, in some ghastly way, I feel responsible for having the tangles all cleared up. They are his mistakes; yet I can't persuade myself that they 're not mine, too."

"I see."

Katharine came upright, in a sudden revolt against her own egotism. "I call them his mistakes," she said; "they are mine. That 's the unbearable part of it. I have lived here in a sort of emotional debauch, and kept myself ignorant of the way things were going. And I was responsible. The vow made me so. I hate the vow; I loathe it. Yet it holds." Her face set for a moment in lines of repugnance for what bound her against her will.

"It has always been so, Nell, always," she declared passionately. "There has always been this warfare between the woman I am and the woman I have made myself by marriage. Not for a minute have I been his wife in thought, with that acquiescence happy women feel; but I have never ceased to be bound by the outer obligations of the tie. I am his business partner. I can't leave him in the lurch." She had been speaking from a deep absorption, but now Elinor's face, the sweet trouble of it, arrested her.

"I make you horribly uncomfortable, don't I?" she asked frankly. "You are thinking about hearthstones, wifely betrayals, all the rest of it. Plainly, Nell, I can't consider that. I dare say I 've deteriorated. Fine shades are immaterial to me. I 'm sorry, but they are."

"It 's only that I ought to go."

"I want you. I want you terribly. Brice would want you, too. He feels safer. A guest wards off domestic lightning."

Natalie stood at the open door.

"What is it?" asked Katharine.

The girl's face wore the brilliancy of a great excitement. In her blue dress and bright hair, with her eyes lighted to star points, she was so impressive that Katharine, used as she was to her, regarded her curiously. When Natalie spoke, there was an odd little catch in her throat.

"Lorraine is coming!"

"Lorraine?"

"She and grandmother. They are to be here to-night. They telegraphed me. They are my guests, you know. That must be understood."

"Splendid, Natalie! How glad you 'll be!"

"They can have my rooms," said Natalie, ignoring the conclusion. "I 'll go up into the third story."

She ran upstairs and began to assort her intimate belongings. She worked with an accurate haste, and in the early afternoon her task was almost over. One great basket still remained, and Natalie sat on the floor beside it, piling odds and ends, and there Dick found her. Flushed from his walk in the sharp outer air, he had a radiance. She schooled herself into the responsiveness that hid her mind.

"Have you heard from her?" he asked quickly.

Natalie stilled the feminine impulse to question "Whom?" and answered,—

"Lorraine? Yes. A telegram. They are coming to-night."

"Are you going to give her these rooms?" he queried, with the same untrammeled eagerness.

"This is for grandmother. We shall move a bed in here. Lorraine will have the bedroom."

"Ah!" He stood for a moment, his hands in his pockets, and then turned in a burst of feeling and walked to the window. "It 's queer, is n't it?" he exclaimed at last, walking back.

"Queer about their coming? Oh, no! it 's like Lorraine. She has been in Europe a long time. Did you think one continent would contain her? You don't know Lorraine."

He spoke softly, in a way that stirred her blood.

"No," he said, "I don't believe I ever knew her. Perhaps now I shall find out. She is older. She 'll be more defined. It 's strange she 's coming."

The basket was full, and the floor cleared of its orderly disarray. Natalie leaned back against a chair, and sat looking at him with a weary face.

"How did you know they were coming?" she asked.

"Lorraine wired me. I am to meet them at the station and bring them here."

"What train?"

"She was n't sure." He spoke innocently, and Natalie's lips moved in the smile that has no mirth in it.

"Well," she said, "you can keep meeting trains until they come."

"Oh, yes! Lorraine never did know where she would be at any given time. Well, I 'll go in town again, and do some work before the blow falls." He spoke gayly. He had the alert air of one for whom something is beginning. At the door he paused while she watched him; he was arrested by her eyes. They held a dumb appeal he was far from recognizing.

"Get up, Natalie, child," he commanded lightly. "Bid me good-by."

She shook her head.

"I can't," she said. "I 'm tired."

"Nonsense! — at two o'clock in the afternoon! You 're never tired."

"No, I 'm never tired," said Natalie, "but I shan't get up. Wait a minute. What did you come for?"

"I was afraid you had n't heard," he called back to her. "I wanted to know whether there would be room enough. Otherwise I should take them to a hotel."

He went whistling down the stairs, and she heard him at the library door talking with Elinor. Natalie sat still, leaning against the chair in the sunlight; gradually she gave up her sway over her body, and it slipped down to the floor. She lay there, her head against her arm, until Katharine appeared with a servant to prepare the room.

Brice Mannering came home to dinner with the blustering innocence of a man not quite sure of the reception he is to meet. But everything was as usual. His father was watching from the window, and had the door open at the proper moment.

"How are you?" said each man bluffly.

"Katie about?" asked Brice.

"Katie — ah, yes, Katie! Katie is very busy, very much occupied. There are guests coming, my son, guests. Very pleasant, very agreeable, very!"

"Guests!" repeated Brice, taking off his coat.

"Well, father, we 'll console each other. Hullo, Kate! read the book?"

Katharine came through the hall, carrying a bowl of roses for the table. Richard had sent them. Her color was high, and she looked undaunted. Mannering's heart sank perceptibly as he noted it. When Katharine wore this demeanor, she was too large, too confident. She filled up the room, and breathed the air away from him.

"No," said she, "not yet."

"The book?" queried his father. "Ah, yes, the book, your book, Brice! The book you are publishing. Very interesting, very!"

The table was laid with the two extra covers; but as there would be no train for an hour, dinner went on at once. Elinor looked about at the faces with an interest responsive to their intensity. A wave of life had struck the household, and they were all buoyed by it. Katharine was vivid under the excitement of her anger and the sense that she had at last started on a longed-for road. Natalie quivered with expectation, and Mannering looked at his wife, from time to time, in the apprehensiveness of one who is thankful at least for present calm. Only the old man kept his usual composure, though he glanced about in a pleased surprise at the accelerated social pace.

Dinner was over, the hour passed, and no one came. Natalie sat in a dumb quiet by the fire. She was the image of propriety, but Elinor saw a pulse beating in her cheek, and thought it meant impatience. It was half past nine, and Katharine had just said, "They won't come to-night," when they were at the door. There was a woman's laugh, a long, sweet resonance, and Richard's overtook it, a note later, and chimed with it in a delightful harmony. Natalie started to her feet, and glanced about her as if the room seemed suddenly too close. Katharine hurried to the door and threw it open, and presently they were all there in a throng of welcome. Lorraine ran up the steps and into the hall. She gave Katharine a kiss on the cheek, and then threw her arms about Natalie in a pretty warmth.

"Natalie!" she cried, in a voice as joyous as her laugh. "Natalie!"

Natalie let her cheeks be kissed and then stood off a little, looking at her sister, and Lorraine looked back at her, from eyes full of a merry challenge. Lorraine was taller than she, with sweet curves not too ample to be girlish. She was brown, brown-eyed, and warm brown of hair, with a flush ever surging through a delicate skin. She gave the strongest possible impression of being all alive, from the tendrils of her hair to her body moving with a perfect grace. Natalie breathed fast, responsive to that vital charm. She felt herself shrink and fade, as if it emphasized some meagreness in her. She knew, without turning, that Richard looked also; she knew his breath had quickened. Meanwhile Madam Walsingham had come up the steps, at first supported by Richard and delivered over to the others, who received her ceremoniously. She was a moving echo of youth, her figure as slender as a girl's, her air as full of grace. She was dressed like an old woman in all the perfect ways devised by art; but there was something incredibly light and delicate about it all. A soft black fabric clung to her, and a little bonnet fitted her head completely. Under it showed some soft white locks, set off by a background of floating lace. She was swathed to the chin in lace, the square chin that had not lost its contour; and her face was ivory white with black brows, and great black eyes intensified by the shadows darkling under them.

"There! there! Lorraine," she said, in a contralto little touched by age, "stand aside. Let me look at Natalie. Come here, child."

Natalie stepped forward, somewhat confused, not knowing whether she was to be kissed or not by a grandmother who had not seen her for a dozen years. Madam Walsingham put out one little hand and touched her arm, while everybody, unaccountably hushed, stood still to listen.

"You 're not well, child," said the old lady brusquely, but with a hint of ineffable kindliness underneath the tone. "What 's the matter?"

Natalie gathered herself.

"I am well," she said, "very well, grandmother."

"Don't call me grandmother. Call me grannie, as Lorraine does. Mrs. Mannering, may I have a cup of tea?" The sudden query came with a smile as quick. It folded the old face into delicious wrinkles, all humorous and not one satirical.

"Please!" said Katharine, "and at once. Or will you go upstairs? The kettle is boiling, and everything is on the table."

Madam Walsingham only wanted her tea. They had dined in town at the station because Lorraine was hungry; so they had lost the train. Lorraine, she explained, taking her cup of strong tea in a white hand too small to bear so many jewels, gave herself the airs of a prima donna, and had to have sustenance, like a baby, when the hour came. This was said with an air of indifferent sweetness, and Lorraine, sitting at the further end of the table, only gave a brief smile, and went on talking to Natalie and Dick, on either side of her. She held a hand of each, she looked from one to the other with a flashing emphasis, insisting that they should love to see her the centre of the talk as she herself loved it.

"No tea, Mrs. Mannering," she said. "No, thank you, nothing. I really dined. And, Natalie, I invented the dances myself. At first I gave them different names, all about things alive — the storm dance, the sunrise dance, the beech tree, the west wind. And, Dick, — the music, — you must try it at once. It 's Roumanian, echoes of everything that 's wild and wonderful. Levinski did it for me. He came over with us, and he 's ill in New York. Come and try it now. Mrs. Mannering, may we?"

Before Katharine could assent, Lorraine was gone, taking the other two with her. Madam Walsingham, sipping her tea, looked round the assembly, and said coolly as one speaks of the weather, —

"What a lot of handsome people!"

Katharine laughed.

"We?" she asked. "Do you mean us? We 're not used to flattery."

"You look like a party, not a family," said the old lady, with an astuteness so neutral as to mean nothing. "You are so different. All but you and your father," she added with a nod at Brice. "You are exactly alike. You were ten years ago."

Brice bowed and felt immensely flattered. The captain, greatly enjoying the atmosphere, had yet, in his seat by the fire, fallen into a doze. He roused himself with a start, and atoned too quickly for having slept.

"Brice's eyes are much like mine," he said, "the Mannering eyes. Now as to eyes — my dear lady, have you ever thought, when you read of the gray-eyed Pallas, what the epithet means? Gray-eyed, you know. Now what does that suggest to you, blue or gray — gray or blue?"

Brice leaned forward and spoke hastily as if he would forestall her judgment.

"My father has a theory," he said, begging her indulgence, "about eyes, you know, the eyes of Pallas."

She nodded composedly at the old man who, though he was a year or so her senior, seemed incredibly young beside her. "We 'll talk about it to-morrow," she said indulgently. It was a tone of gracious patronage, but the captain rather seemed to like it, and smiled off into his doze again. Madam Walsingham had taken her last sip of tea, and her eyes met Elinor's. Elinor sat with the graceful quiescence of one outside the group, and yet ready at any moment to be included in it.

"You are a stranger," said the old lady, smiling at her. "You have lived in Italy."

"Yes, madame," said Elinor, with a charming deference.

"You are a Catholic?"

"Oh, no! I have no church."

"Ah, well, you 've the Catholic spirit — obedience, adoration. It 's very beautiful; but follow your blood while it 's young enough to move, my dear, follow your blood. Forgive me, I 'm an old woman. I 'm going to die soon, and I have to say what I think. Now, Mrs. Mannering, now for my bed; and thank you for giving me a bed at this short notice."

They went into the hall and stood a moment at the library door, where Dick was at the piano, playing something with a wildly moving measure. Lorraine, in the middle of the room, stood poised like a statue. She held up her skirts about fine-shod feet, and now and then took an illustrative step. Her face had changed into an exhilarated interest, not in her audience, but in what she was doing. Natalie stood back against the wall, watching, fascinated, and yet as if she longed to get as far away as possible. When she saw the others, she came swiftly to Madam Walsingham as to a refuge.

"Grannie," she said in a whisper, "let me show you to your room."

Madam Walsingham said good-night, and they went upstairs together.

"Can I get you all you want?" asked Natalie timidly, as they entered the room. "Shall I call Lorraine?"

"My dear," said the old lady, still with that sweet indifference, "never call Lorraine. Always let Lorraine do exactly what she pleases. I do, and I am extremely popular. When you are seventy-eight, like me, remember that the only way to be welcome when you are old is never to interfere in the pursuits of younger people."

IX

IN ONE FORENOON

Madam Walsingham seated herself next day in the great window looking down toward the village, and stayed there holding court. Elinor especially was fascinated by her even flow of talk about things doing in literature and art. She had traveled everywhere. She spoke of châteaux as if she had lived in them and shared their early history like their present. Great pictures were catalogued and hung away in the galleries of her mind. Curiously enough she had the same grasp on the new as on the old; she had at her tongue's end the names of men who were possibilities as yet, and others who had died after their futile grasp at the bays. She talked with a masterly precision, and yet indifferently, as if the art of life concerned her no more than life itself. It was like reading an eccentric book.

"You make me feel as if I got nothing out of all my years in Italy," said Elinor, at last.

"You got something I never could have had," said the old lady conclusively. "What did you have a chance to get, after all? You lived up there in the mountains with your father and the peasants."

"I might have studied. We did read a great deal, my father and I, but I never put my heart into it."

"No. You were young. You stayed up there with your youth fermenting and bubbling over the brim."

Elinor's eyes widened and she clasped her hands together upon her knees. Memory was keen within her of flawless days up there above the world, and nights, when the violet dusk meant nothing to her but America, and another heart beating there, whether for her or not she never knew. The remembrance of the simple people who had loved her smote her with a great gratitude, and she thought with self-pity of the days when she had tried to copy their worship of an unknown God until life seemed nothing but obedience. The old lady was watching her, not curiously, but with the same remote yet exact attention she gave to life in all its aspects.

"You got religion up there," she said. "Yes, it 's what people call religion. It 's the obedience to something not ourselves. You could hardly have existed without it. I should say you got something more intense, more passionate, than if you 'd been with folks and taken on their ways. If life is vibration, you got that."

Difficult tears had come into Elinor's eyes.

"I don't know what I got," she said. "Only now you have Italy — France, too — in your pocket, and I only know I 've lived there."

"My dear," said the old lady, "when you 're as old as I am, the game is over — the game of life. That 's all there is worth having. It was over very early with me. Then I began fitting together the separate bits of the puzzle, and I chose the prettiest remnants I could find — art of various sorts. You get very tired of piecing life, at my age. Nothing fits. Art is a very good little toy in a universe you 're shy of." She stopped, watching the two sisters across the hall; they were sitting at a window looking out on the orchard.

Lorraine was talking and laughing in a bubbling key. One would have said she was having the happiest moment of her life; but Lorraine was always happy. Natalie had some white work in her lap, and now and then she took a stitch.

"Natalie has a soul, has n't she," said the old lady musingly. "Is n't that unfortunate?"

"Yes, Natalie has a soul," answered Elinor, following her gaze.

"Lorraine has n't," said Madam Walsingham with great satisfaction. "That 's why Lorraine is so delightful. That 's why we let her drag us round at the cart's tail, and like it. She 's dragged me all over Europe. My old bones ache with following. But I would n't give up Lorraine."

"She is very beautiful."

"She is a picture of adorable youth and happiness that will always be happy because it does n't fret after the unseen or care who goes to the wall. If you 're sick or sorry, if it rains or thunders, all you 've got to do is to look at Lorraine and see a summer's day. When I was in Venice, I nearly died one night of pleurisy. Lorraine was going to take care of me. She kissed me good-night; she said 'Poor Grannie!' and lay down beside me and slept like a baby. I grinned into the dark, whenever I could catch my breath. I knew how sweet and sound she 'd be in the morning."

At that moment the two girls left their place in the window and came across the hall. Natalie wore a tired face.

"Natalie," said the grandmother, "you 're very much in love with that young man you 're engaged to, are n't you? — that young Horne!"

Natalie crimsoned to her hair.

"Nonsense," said Madam Walsingham, "you are engaged to him. Lorraine, Natalie is engaged to young Horne. You know that, don't you?"

The question came with precision, but Lorraine received it as lightly as one might catch a feather. She only put her cheek against her sister's, as they stood there, and said, "Dear Natalie!"

"It 's dear everybody with Lorraine," said Madam Walsingham. "It saves her from distinctions."

"Ah, there 's Mr. Horne!" said Lorraine suddenly, a light in her brown eyes. "Is n't it, Natalie? I 'll ask him myself." She was out of the room as Gilbert Horne opened the front door and stepped into the hall. She greeted him with a charming grace.

"Mr. Horne, won't you shake hands with me? And may n't we have tea in your house in the woods? Dick used to write me about it."

Gilbert brought the winter air in with him. He seemed to Lorraine more of a man than she had yet met in America, and her nostrils widened. He dropped her hand after an instant, though he still looked at her with a grave, elderly indulgence.

"You may have tea in the house in the woods," he said, "but not to-day. I came over to ask you to eat a civilized supper with me at my house at six o'clock."

"The house you live in?"

"Yes."

"But why not the house in the woods?"

"It is n't big enough. Besides, the chimney smokes, and the owls have built nests in the rafters, and the doors won't shut nor the windows open."

"You mean you won't have us?"

Gilbert's eyes smiled at her, and as Katharine appeared from the dining-room, he called, —

"Mrs. Mannering, will you bring your family over to supper?"

She came to the doorway and leaned against the casing, looking at him. She was not thinking about these trivial affairs save as they concerned her purpose. She had stayed awake nearly all night, planning her life; but vigils made no impression on her splendid health.

"Do you want us?" she asked absently.

"Dick wants it," he answered, lowering his tone.

Katharine crossed the hall to ask Elinor and Madam Walsingham, and Lorraine looked up in Horne's face with the air of a charming child too intent on its game to care who plays it, so it still keeps on.

"Is there a piano?" she asked.

"Yes, there 's a piano."

"I 'll put on my gold tissue, and let you see me dance." She spoke with a pleasure so real that Horne felt his blood pump a little under it, and just then Katharine came back to say conventionally that they would come.

"I 'm going down after fal-lals for supper," said Horne to Katharine. "I 'll get your mail."

The door closed behind him, and Lorraine laughed.

"I believe the man snubbed me," said she, with lifted brows. "Bless his heart! Come, Natalie — we 'll have out my gold tissue. There 's a rip under the arm. Can you sew, child? I 'll warrant you can, you neat thing. Dear Natalie!"

As soon as she could leave Madam Walsingham, Elinor ran upstairs for her hat and jacket, and hurried out at the side door. Katharine, absorbed in the tempest of her own brewing, would not miss her, and she was suddenly impatient of the house, and hungry for a spot she knew. The day was of the sort that, in the midst of winter, shows incredible promise of a far-off spring. There was even a blue haze in the distance, and flocks of little brown birds rose from roadside branches as she passed, to settle further on. She kept the road to the gap in the wall, and then took the cart path into the woods. There she stopped and looked about her, free of the atmosphere of the house and the minds of people. The depth of the woods intensified her idea of their extent. As far as she could see, straight trunks rose to the upper air, where their tops kept a soft, unceasing monotone. She shut her eyes, and then opened them to a gladder sense of peace. Her long homesickness was stilled at last, and she felt the buoyancy of one to whom an idea of years has suddenly become real. She went on, very light of foot, to the house in the woods, paused a moment in the little clearing, and then pushed the door open and stepped in. Some one had been there that morning. The embers were red, with a veiling ash, and the air was sweet from woody resins. She stopped a moment, the blood mounting to her cheeks, because the stillness spoke so palpably of Horne. Yet all the members of the two houses came there when they pleased, one to read, another to muse. She was not even an intruder, and she drew off her gloves and sat down in a content so deep that it was like a compensating rapture for long absence. She shut her eyes again, and withdrew into her dream.

The walls were dear, — every inch of wood Gilbert Horne had laid with his own hand to make the house; everything about her had vibrated to his breath. Yet there seemed some boldness in espial while he was away. The hospitality of a chair at his fireside was enough for her desires, vagrant as they were. There was a step, and the door swung in.

"I knew you would n't mend the fire," said Horne. Her eyes started open, but she did not move. He could never surprise her; he only brought a sense of new completion. "Yes, I started for the village," he went on, as if she had spoken, "but I knew you would post down here as soon as you were sure of solitude. I 'll go when I 've fixed the fire." He brought two logs from a recess behind the fireplace, and coaxed the blaze with a handful of pine cones. When it was crackling up over the bark, and the cones were red transparencies, exceeding their own first beauty, he sat down on the other side of the hearth. "Yes, I 'll go in a minute," he promised, smiling at her.

Elinor smiled back without speaking.

"Yes, I know," he said. "That was always an irritating way you had. You would n't contradict, but you knew perfectly well what I meant to do. You think now I 'm not going at all. Well, I 'm not. I 'm going to talk. I have n't talked for years. I waited for you to come."

Elinor's face sprung into so warm a beauty that, looking at her dispassionately as he spoke, she startled him.

"It 's quite true," he continued argumentatively. "I have grown more and more silent. It is n't because

I 'm reserved. It 's because I 've had nothing to say. But you 're the key that opens all locks. I told you so before."

"Talk," said Elinor, leaning her head back on the tall chair and looking into the fire. "Tell me everything that happened."

"Where shall I begin?"

"When I went away."

He was silent a moment, also musing over the fire. A deep frown, like a cut, came between his eyes.

"There is n't a blessed thing to tell," he said at last. "I have simply lived here and grown into a vegetable. I 've had no ambitions. I only thought I ought to have them — no loves, no hatreds. The people that reviewed my poor little books accuse me of having a passion for nature. It 's no such thing. I only feel more at home out of doors. Some of the fellows I used to know in college say when they meet me, 'You 're not married, poor old man!' They think I 'm lonely. I 'm not lonely. I merely half exist, as I understand other people's existence."

The words hurt her. She had come back with so definite an idea of him, his place in life, his big desires, that he seemed to be repudiating the angel of himself which she had wrought. It swept bewilderingly upon her that because she had felt bereft without him she had made the woman's mistake of assuming his bereavement without her. Womanlike, she picked out the phrase that hurt her most and dwelt upon it.

"No," she said, "you are not lonely. That 's good. You are happier so." Yet she believed she lied; for as she spoke, her heart yearned for his head upon it, and the comforting she could give in some of those unseen ways where women must companion men.

"I am not happier," said Horne. "I am safer. I am as safe as that pine-tree out there till some one cuts him down."

A dull ache began within her. He was breaking a beautiful dream. Through those years away from him she had seen her ideal of him grow and strengthen to withstand the ills of life. To bring him gifts — love, loyalty, delight — had seemed worth any pain. But now he denied wanting anything. He turned the fabric of her dreaming into something very poor. She took up her gloves, and he looked at her.

"You 're not going?" he asked, in a quick compunction. "I 've bothered you somehow. I 've spoiled your morning."

"No, you 've been very kind." She tried to turn the current of their talk. "Why did you tell that pretty Lorraine she could n't have her tea here?"

"I don't like her much," he answered absently, still watching her face, and plainly speculating over the cloud upon it. "She 's going to worry Natalie."

"Worry Natalie?"

"Yes, over Dick. Lorraine is his fixed idea. If he had married her years ago, he 'd have found out her mystery. That 's what bewitches him, and it 's no mystery at all. She sways everybody a bit, she 's such a healthy little animal. I wish I knew how I troubled you."

Elinor was at the door, and he turned to open it for her. She seemed, he thought suddenly, to be another sort of person. There was remoteness in her air, a fine withdrawal. She did not speak conventionally, but her tone put him a long way off.

"You did n't trouble me; but I 've rested, and now I 'll go on." She nodded at him again familiarly, and took the forest path, while he stood at the door watching her, that puzzled frown cut deep into his face.

X

HIGH TEA AT HORNE'S

It was a magnificent high tea at Gilbert Horne's. Old Sally, careful of her credit and his, fried chicken, made coffee and little biscuits, and chuckled behind the dining-room door when she heard them praised. Cassie served them, and stepped about the table with her head held high in a pose of pride. She, too, wanted Gilbert Horne's party to go off well. In his own house he was no longer a silent man. The exactions of hospitality lay heavily upon him, and he assumed an alertness yielding him no enjoyment. He talked a great deal, chiefly with Lorraine, because she willed it, while her grandmother punctuated the dialogue with a ruthless commentary.

"Now I'll dance for you," said Lorraine, when they rose from the table. "You want me to, don't you, Mr. Horne?"

"Very much," said Gilbert. He was following them into the library, and he gave Cassie, where she stood with folded hands, a smile in passing. Her face kindled, and Elinor, turning by chance, saw it and throbbed with understanding. Here was another woman, she knew at once, who cared about Gilbert Horne, and whose language never reached him. He found Madam Walsingham the most comfortable chair, and brought her a footstool. Then he piled up the fire, and turned to face them where they had disposed themselves. "May she dance, Madam Walsingham?" he asked.

"Yes, she must," said the old lady. "Lorraine won't be satisfied unless she is the centre of the picture. She dances very well, too."

Madam Walsingham was dressed in black that came high in the throat and long over her little hands. A black lace mantilla shrouded her hair and was tied loosely under her chin. Her small face seemed even tragic in the intensity of its contrasting hues. Yet she was the one person present, save perhaps Lorraine, who had a fixed distaste for melancholy.

The piano was in a corner facing the room. Richard took his place there, and began running over swift threads of melody out of the manuscript Lorraine gave him. He was flushed and eager. Natalie could guess how his eyes dilated with the excitement of the moment, but she did not look at him. Lorraine, in her dress of golden tissue, stood by him, a hand on his shoulder, and talked rapidly. As she spoke, she shifted her pose, and illustrated with her eyes and hands, like one too full of life not to put an overflowing vigor into every act. She turned to the others now.

"I am ready," she announced, in her bell-like voice. "This is the invocation — Levinski says — 'to the dawn.'" She advanced gravely into the open space, and stood poised, her bare arms lifted, her face clamorous with life. The girl seemed a teeming censer to being as it is, not as we would make it. Elinor felt her own pulse quicken. Beautiful images occurred to her, in swift succession, like the figures in a lovely frieze. Her mind flew back to the youth of the world, when gods walked with men, and to be was to breathe in beauty like the air. She was conscious that Lorraine moved in a sweet rhythm to the melody, that her arms wove invisible spells the eyes ached to remember forever, and that her feet beat out a noiseless harmony. And still the accompanying dream went on, filled with crowding images: gods descending for human joyance, shepherds crushing thyme on Hymettus, altars weighted with floral sacrifice, kine upon broad meadows, and then again the oxen decked for innocent triumphs, their foreheads wound with wreaths. The dancer stopped upon a pose as light as Mercury's, and on the moment Madam Walsingham, who had been watching Elinor with an odd little smile, bent forward and touched her.

"What did you think of?" she asked, under cover of the plaudits from the rest, led noisily by Brice.

"Italy — Greece — I believe," said Elinor, confusedly. She lifted a hand to her forehead. "Old times — times that never were."

Madam Walsingham nodded her head and smiled triumphantly.

"It's always so," she said. "It's hypnotism. It's not her dancing. That's good enough. It's even beautiful, but the effect of it is out of all proportion. I always select the most sensitive person in the company and ask him what he saw. It's always the same: Greece — Italy — the things that never were."

"The most sensitive person! Then why not Natalie?"

"Natalie did n't see it. She watched the young man play."

Natalie was sitting in a low chair by the fire. She had been regarding Dick. Her face was calm, but it wore a concentrated look, as if she had put all her forces into one act of will. She was conscious of that; he, she knew, braiding the music with Lorraine's motion, was like one moving in a rapturous calm, far out to sea, and every breath of hers recalled him. She tried to break the spell, and, as if she had succeeded, he got up, flushed with pleasure, and came over to her.

"What is it, Natalie?" he asked.

She smiled brilliantly up at him. It was a brief triumph, but it heartened her.

"Nothing, Dick," she said.

Lorraine had seated herself on a cushion and thrown both her arms across Natalie's knees. For a moment she rested there, and then raised her face, flushed, but not tired.

"I love it," she murmured thrillingly. "I love to dance."

Katharine spoke with a charming grace: "There is nothing to add after your dancing. It's too beautiful. It makes everything commonplace. We can't say 'Thank you.'"

"Shall I dance again?" asked Lorraine quite eagerly, springing to her feet. She turned to Horne, "Shall I?"

"Yes, dance again," he answered. It had stirred him, too, not toward visions, but the desire of life. He hardly knew this keener mood. While Dick was preluding, Horne slipped out of the room, and presently returned with Cassie. She halted in the doorway, unwilling to advance, and Elinor motioned her to a chair. The girl shook her head, and stood there in an unconsidered pose, Gilbert waiting beside her with a gentle deference. Elinor thought no more of Italy, even with a bacchante dance beating into ecstasy before her; she only noted that the man and woman, complementing each other, typified the strength of the earth. Old Sally stood back among the shadows and watched them all. Her blood also mounted. She could have danced all night, she thought, under a growing moon, and shown these people what things are possible on the earth. Before Lorraine had ceased, Cassie slipped away, and then Horne came back to the fire and sat down.

"I am going to dance in public," Lorraine volunteered to Katharine.

Dick let his clever hand blunder upon a chord. He got up from the piano, and came forward. "No," he said. "No!"

Lorraine looked up at him with a willful roguery calling out a dimple in her cheek.

"Yes," she insisted. "Yes. If Levinski does n't get better soon, you 'll have to go and play for me."

Natalie dropped her fan; but though Richard was near her he did not see it, and Brice Mannering restored it with a punctilious bow.

"You are quite right, Lorraine," he said, "quite right. I have seldom seen dancing which — in fact, I never saw dancing in any degree like it."

"My dear young lady," began the captain, rousing himself in the haste of one unexpectedly summoned, "it is unusual, most unusual. I can think of nothing but a nymph — nymphs, you know, nymphs. Now old Homer says — by the way, when we hear of the gray-eyed Pallas, what should you say the epithet might mean? The gray-eyed Pallas!"

"I don't know who she was," said Lorraine drowsily, yet with a perfect deference. "Pallas? You tell me, Captain Mannering."

The old man drew his chair nearer, delighted with an auditor, and Lorraine listened smilingly. But Madam Walsingham noted presently that the dialogue had left Pallas and come home to dancing.

When they went back that night by the path through the orchard, Lorraine and Dick were walking together, she in the track and he through the snow beside her. She was explaining her plan of getting before the public, first in smaller towns and then, suitably heralded, in the cities.

"You 'll come and play for me, Dick," she was saying, in a tone quite anxious in its coaxing quality. "Don't you think you 'll come?"

Natalie, afraid of hearing, stepped out into the snow and passed them. She hurried on to the house, and when good-nights were said, she had gone to her own room.

As Elinor was closing her chamber door, Katharine came running up the stairs. Her face was brilliant with life and color.

"Give me a minute," she said. "Let me leave the door ajar. I want to hear Brice when he comes down from his father's room. Elinor, that girl makes one feel alive."

"Lorraine?"

"Lorraine, of course. I love her without loving her, because she 's overflowing with sheer life and the worship of it. I 'm grateful to her. I hate her, too. She 's got youth, Nell, youth!"

"We don't care," asserted Elinor, putting an arm about the great firm shoulders. "We 've had it."

"Ah, but to what end? You wasted yours cloistered up in those mountains. I wasted mine here playing volcano — emitting fire, smoke, ashes, and lava. We ought to have children ten or twelve years old, and be reconciled to increasing girth and aging hands. Your hands are exquisite, Nell. Mine are middle-aged. Hark! there goes Brice." She gave Elinor a light kiss on the cheek, and running down the stairs she came upon Mannering just as he was beginning to cover the library fire.

XI

MAN AND WIFE

Mannering rose from the fire, shovel in hand.

"Dear me, Katie!" he muttered; "dear me!"

Her militant air could scarcely be ignored. It put him at once on guard. His old knowledge of her fortified him with new data for the occasion. This, he knew, was no time of night to talk, and therefore it was the time she would select. Secure in her tremendous health, she could take chances against to-morrow. With the thrift of the middle-aged, he resented that foolhardiness.

"Sit down, Brice," she commanded, "I want to talk to you."

He stood there, the shovel in his hand like a defensive weapon.

"It 's eleven o'clock," he objected fretfully.

"I don't care if it 's twelve. Brice, the one trouble is that we have n't courage."

He put the shovel in its place, and then stood on the hearthstone facing her. At that moment it seemed to him that the only courage he lacked was the courage to go to bed. Yet he took the part of prudence in not saying so; he knew exactly how trivialities would be received.

"That girl shows me what life could be," Katharine went on, in a glowing confidence.

Brice breathed easier. The talk was promising to run into an irrelevant channel.

"What girl?" he asked, with a cheerful interest.

"Lorraine. She is so full of power. She never will sit down to ossify and let the moss grow over her. She has the courage to live. Brice, we must live, too."

"She is a pretty girl," he owned, with a secure vagueness.

"You and I have both been cowards," said Katharine, throwing an extravagant vigor into her argument. "We have hated living together. You have hated it as much as I. Brice, tell me you 've hated it."

In honesty, he could not answer. It still seemed to him that all he hated was being kept up when he should have been in bed. When he sat up after eleven he was accustomed to take the eight fifty-eight train instead of the eight forty-three, and that always disarranged his day. He felt already the wrong done the morrow.

"Well, we 'll talk it all over sometime," he said, with a motion toward the shovel. The fire was dying down under its ashy bank. Only a velvet spark or two were quick.

"No," said Katharine, "we 'll talk it over to-night. I 've been a coward, and I shan't be any more. I 've told you I wanted to go, and when you would n't let me go peaceably I 've stayed. Now, peace or war, I 'm going."

"Oh, well, Katie, there won't be war, I guess! Only," he added artfully, "we 're likely to be more comfortable than we have been. The book is selling. We shall get some money out of that."

"The book! The very thing that pushes us apart for good!"

"Why?" Some semblance of earnestness awakened in him with surprise. The real man looked out, the man so used to comfortable living that he had eschewed strong passions until emotion had, in its justice, repudiated him.

"Why? I don't quite know why. Chiefly because it shows me how foreign we are to each other. We don't agree in the smallest particular. But that 's not all. What you 've done is like the shock that throws us apart. I can't get over it. I can't come near you again."

"The book is going to sell," pronounced Brice irrelevantly.

"It is not going to sell; it is going to die."

"There, there, there!" He might have been saying, "Tut, tut," in traditional fashion, to a child. "Books can't be smuggled out of sight like that. We are printing another thousand. What do you expect me to do with them?"

"Buy them in, recall them, burn them, melt up the plates! Do whatever is done with books that don't deserve to live."

"Now, now, Katie! Think what you 're saying. You know very well I can't. I shan't, if it comes to that."

"Then I shall do things you won't like, violent things we shall neither of us like. I shall tell the story of the book. It shall go into every newspaper in the country — how I wrote it and you stole it."

"Ah, but that will sell the book!"

"There won't be any book to be sold. You will stop printing it."

Mannering braced himself against the impact not only of her arrogance, but old memories of contests where her will was always dominant. This seemed to him the crucial instant. If at this time he was not a man, he could expect nothing of the future. He cleared his throat, and spoke with the more desperate valor in that he shrank from the effect of what he had to say.

"I shall go on printing it."

Katharine looked at him for a second, and then walked back and forth once the length of the room. He turned toward the door, but she was there before him; she closed it gently.

"No," she said; "you must not go. Some things have got to be talked out to-night."

He sat down, and she took a chair opposite. It was an ease her tense limbs almost refused, yet she repudiated the cheap advantage of standing over him in accusation.

"Brice," she said gently, "we 've got to go back a long way, ever so many years. It was a hideous thing for us to marry."

"You were a nice girl, Katie," returned Mannering, with an air of general compliment.

"I have never been a nice girl since. I have done nothing but hate my life, and it won't be long before I hate you, too."

She seemed to him irresponsible, and he tried to observe the tolerance we accord hysteria. Katharine's heart beat hard. She had never felt so much emotion, and she did not propose to shirk it. It seemed a strenuous duty to tell the truth which alone made any new beginning possible.

"I knew you and I were strangers," she went on, "but I did n't know until the other night how you had cheated me."

"Cheated you?"

"Yes, cheated me. You got me to sign away my right to this house by a miserable subterfuge. I don't want the house, but I can't forgive the lie."

"Oh, come, come, now!" cried Mannering, rousing himself in candid protest, "I could n't explain to you just then; you would n't have listened to me. You were all taken up with Vane Williams's music."

She whitened, and her eyes glittered from an impassive face.

"That is true," she said; "that 's just. I was taken up with Vane Williams. The music need n't count. But if you cared, if you had been man enough to mind it — tell me, did you mind?" A sudden wonder stirred in her voice and yearned there to find him more human than he seemed. She longed to think he had ever suffered for her and forborne to mention it; that would have given their life together some significance. But he answered cheerfully: —

"I did n't care. Bless you, no! it occupied your time. See here, Katie," — his voice fell to a note of confidence, — "do you mind the house being mortgaged to Horne?"

"It scorches me to think of it."

"Now, why?"

"For many reasons. One is, that we have lived here neighbors, and always more luxuriously than he. I 'm not sure we have n't patronized him a little. Not I, God knows! I could n't make that mistake. But you, your father. I can hear your father now, rambling on to Gilbert Horne about your success in business, your cleverness with the farm, and telling how you meant to spend your latter days abroad. And all the time we were living on his money."

"There!" said Brice soothingly. "So you 'd like to have it all paid up, now, would n't you?"

"Like it? It 's the only thing that will ever make me feel like an honest woman. But this is what we must do; this is a part of the courage I want us both to show. Turn the place over to Gilbert Horne. We 'll go to town and board, you and your father in one place, I in another. I 'll find a situation. I 'll support myself and give you all I can. I will, Brice, I promise; you can trust me."

She spoke as eagerly as some young thing who, beginning life, pleads for the chance to make mere being possible. To Mannering it seemed a fantastic arrangement of counters in a game played for the diversion of the moment. He shook his head airily.

"No, no," he said, "that 's ridiculous. Besides, father could n't stand it."

"He would hardly mind," said Katharine, still with that air of passionate pleading. "He is different now, different from what you think. A little satisfies him. His wants are very simple. If he had a sunny window, and you to come home at night — Oh, Brice, listen to me! Let him pay a part of the penalty, too. It must fall on all of us."

"Not on father!" said Mannering. He smiled at her, and took a more restful pose. The chair, with its familiar hollows, compensated him in some degree for the smarts she dealt him. It reminded him that though this talk of ideal conditions might go buzzing on about his ears, the homely ministrants of life would still be kind to him.

"See here, Katie," he said reasonably, "you want the mortgage paid off? Well, the book will do it. Mark my words, it will."

Fury assailed her. It was an inward convulsion she could well control; yet for that reason, it was the more terrible.

"The book!" she repeated, in a low tone. "The book! the book shall be suppressed. If you do not hear to me, you will be sorry. You will be terribly sorry."

"Come! come!" said he, in uneasy ambush behind his smile. "What are you going to do about it?"

Katharine stood still for a moment, looking at the floor.

"I don't know what I shall do," she said, at length. "Sometimes I am afraid to think. But one thing is true: it is dangerous to fetter creatures as you are fettering me. I tell you, Brice, it is dangerous."

The naked sincerity of her words moved her to redoubled fervor. She was a creature without reserves, without evasions. Any eye might have looked into her heart at any time, to see it as it was. There was no one to whom in her intemperate candor she was not ready to show her unveiled mind. To-night, her blood moving faster after the abandon of Lorraine's dancing, she was doubly eager to sweep expedients aside and take the track of a robust living. The way she saw at any present moment was, she knew, the only one. If Brice could find the path before them, then they might walk in it, and the troubles that wait on cowardice would all be over.

"Brice!" she said eagerly. "Brice!"

He was winding his watch, a duty always rigorously performed at nine o'clock, though to-night Lorraine's art had beguiled him into a rare forgetfulness.

"I am all wrong," declared Katharine, in a full, sweet tone of childlike pleading. "I threaten, I abuse you. I ought to show you how lovely things might be for us. Why, Brice, if we were only brave, we could be happy, we could live!"

Mannering returned his watch to his pocket, and in the act of smiling at her in a diffused corroboration, it occurred to him that she was very handsome with that flush and those dilated eyes. An amiable patronage rose in him as the legal head of this lawless yet abounding creature, and he pursed his lips over the swift conclusion that few men could have managed her at all. He felt like extending the sceptre, and justifying his permanent sway by conceding her some momentary triumph.

"Quite right, Katie, quite right," he announced rhetorically. "Yes, that's decided. We must live." A familiar cadence struck him, and he added, to his own satisfaction, "Live and let live! live and let live!"

She smiled upon him breathlessly.

"Brice," she urged, "we won't quarrel any more. We'll decide things together, and do them, no matter what it costs. We'll pay our debts. We'll blot out that book. Will you do that? Oh, Brice, just answer me!"

She was like a temperamental wind blowing him to tatters. She forced him to take shelter anywhere, even in a wild agreement.

"Yes," he muttered. "Yes, Kate, yes!"

A change rushed over her; it turned her to trembling and brought tears into her burning eyes. She stretched out both hands toward him.

"Oh, Brice," she cried, "will you do this? Will you, really? Oh, I shall bless you as long as I live!"

He rose, and took her hands as quickly as she had given them. A fickle emotion stirred in him, and he felt the uncomprehending triumph of a nature which has ignorantly moved a more tempestuous one. Katharine let him keep her hands, hardly knowing he had them. She poured out words in a torrent.

"If we could part friends, when we separate! If we could only do that! Think what it would be, what a triumph to have kept some kindliness out of this disaster! Why, I only hate you because you are my husband! If we were parted, we could be such friends. We could say to people, 'Here's old faithfulness saved out of the past. The past was a mistake, but something good blossomed out of it.' You don't know what a friend I could be. I'd take care of your father, if he were sick. I'd do anything for you — anything." The words came throbbingly with a rush of gratitude. New tears flooded her eyes, and his look warmed responsively.

He held her closer, and drew toward her.

"Give me a kiss, Katie," he besought her thickly.

She snatched her hands away with a little cry like that of a hurt beast.

"No! no! Don't touch me!"

The poignant revolt of the flesh had got hold of her and made a sickness of the mind. She shuddered, and her limbs trembled under her. For the moment he was not the creature whose slighter spirit she had long despised; he was brute man, threatening her revolting will. Nature was alive in both of them, a terrible antagonism. Fear beat its wing upon her, urging her to flight and sanctuary. There was a sound at the door, a tap, and then it opened. Elinor stood there in a white wrapper, her long hair about her face. She looked like a saint roused out of sleep, and drowsy. But her eyes were wide in startled questioning.

"I thought I heard" — she began — "I heard a cry." She had spoken apologetically, and with the words she would have gone, but Katharine's hand arrested her. Katharine was shuddering all over. Her lips seemed stiffening, and her touch was cold.

"Wait," she said. "I 'll go with you."

But Elinor withdrew her hand and went as softly as she came.

Katharine stood facing Brice, her gaze compelling him. Her eyes seemed to be lingering only for the just intimidation of what they hated.

"You have promised me," she said.

He was silent, shamefaced after the folly of hot blood.

"Brice, it was a promise. You 'll remember that?"

"Yes, yes, Katie," he conceded. "Of course I shall remember."

She went slowly up the stairs to the landing where Elinor awaited her. Katharine stood a moment silent, and then said shakingly, —

"Stay with me, Nell. Nothing is the matter. Only I 'm a coward."

Elinor went with her to her room, and they lay beside each other silent, with clasped hands, until the dawn.

XII

TWO DAUGHTERS OF ONE RACE

Lorraine and Natalie sat together in the living-room, Lorraine under streaming sunlight awakening her and the chintz-covered chair into a summer bloom. Natalie had her sewing in her lap, and now and then she took a few careful stitches.

"What makes you sew?" asked Lorraine at last. "How can you?"

It was new work for Natalie. It was the screen for her thoughts, the veil of her betraying eyes: but she answered lightly, —

"I like it."

"You can't. You never were made that way. You 're so different, Natalie!"

"I am older," replied Natalie, with a cruel precision meant only for herself.

"You used to be such a little devil. There was no keeping you under. The house was n't big enough. Now you sit and mope."

"Oh, no! I don't mope, I sew."

"What is the thing, a tray cloth?"

"Yes."

"You don't do it very well."

"I do it vilely," said Natalie, with indifference.

Lorraine came to her feet in joyous haste.

"Oh, there 's Dick!" she cried, with pleasure in her voice. "He promised to work last night and come out early. We 're going to walk. Tell him I 'll be ready."

She ran upstairs, and Natalie heard her singing in a full sweet tone above. Richard came into the room without stopping to take off his coat. He looked very big and full of life. Natalie, glancing up, felt her heart constrict at the beauty of his youth. He was not dulled from long hours since Lorraine had come, although now he worked at top heat, earning time for play.

"Good-morrow, lass," he said, with a sweeping bow to her. "Where 's Lorraine? Get your things. We 'll go to walk."

Natalie was gazing at him with a specious sweetness; she spoke cordially, from what seemed openness of mind: —

"Lorraine is upstairs. She has gone to get her things."

"Get yours. Hurry up. It 's a fine old day!"

She did not move, and Lorraine's running step was on the stair. Dick turned and met her at the door. Her face had the flush of anticipated pleasure; her eyes were two brown pools with glints in them.

"Good boy!" she greeted him, giving him her muff to hold, while she drew on a glove. "Where shall we go?"

"Anywhere. Come, Natalie, child, hurry."

"No, not I," returned Natalie, smiling at them. "I 've got to sew."

"She 's got to sew!" laughed Lorraine. She took back her muff, and waved Natalie a kiss. "Goose! but you 're a dear Natalie."

Dick went over to Natalie, and stood regarding her for a moment.

"Everything all right?" he asked. She looked him in the eyes, and her own deceiving glance held steady.

"Oh, yes!" she said. "I don't want to go, that 's all."

He smiled at her, and with a touch of her hair above the forehead, hastened out in what seemed to her, watching him with a weary gaze, the haste of one set free. She dropped her work on a shelf under the window at her side, put back her head against the chair, and closed her eyes. Her face was pinched and pale. Some inexorable thought crept over it and stiffened it into a sadness too poignant to be explained, save as old grief revived by memory.

There Madam Walsingham, coming into the room with her book, found her, and giving her one sharp glance, passed her by, to sit down where Lorraine had been lounging in the sun. Natalie had forgotten the existing world. That light step failed to rouse her; but presently she opened her eyes with the feeling of one who is looked at. Passing a hand across her face, she cleared it of its trouble.

"That 's right," said the old lady. "Put such thoughts aside. Bury them. They won't do you any good."

Natalie smiled, but in a different way from that kept for Lorraine. A telltale quiver at the corners of her mouth betrayed her as she was.

"You wear me out," continued the old lady, with irritation. "I came here for a few minutes' rest in a dull New England house before Lorraine drags me away to be seen no more, and I find you white hot with all the passions of life. What do you mean by it, minx?"

Natalie laughed now with real amusement. She was under an old woman's spell. Madam Walsingham had drawn her as near as she ever invited human being. Natalie had learned by tacit permission that her grandmother was great fun, and that underneath her rallying lay some kindliness not given to speech.

"You are making a great mistake with that young man," said Madam Walsingham. She folded her hands over the book upon her lap, and looked at Natalie dispassionately.

"I did n't care about walking."

"Don't parry. You 're no match for me. I say what I please now, because I shall be in my grave inside of two years. Do you know why he likes Lorraine?"

Natalie did not answer.

"Because she is a perfectly healthy and perfectly natural human thing. She 'll be more healthy when she comes in from walking. You 're getting yellow, in the house."

"You don't understand," said Natalie coldly. "There is no rivalry between Lorraine and me."

"You made your mistake at the outset," said Madam Walsingham, as if she read from an interesting book. "I know the kind of girl you are. You adored the creature and told him so. Live farther off, child, live farther off."

Some tension yielded in Natalie, and in spite of herself she spoke. The old woman seemed quite impersonal; she tempted candor.

"It does n't matter. I shan't live long — at all."

"Nonsense! Not live long? Why not?"

"I don't know; but I feel it. Something is broken in me. I shall not live."

Madam Walsingham looked at her for a few moments in quiet speculation.

"You are one of those curious creatures," she said, "who have no life of their own apart from the thing they worship. No, I dare say you won't live: yet in the beginning you were stronger than Lorraine. Perhaps I should n't weaken your resistance by agreeing with you; however, it does n't matter. You think the creature has changed since he fell in love with you. I dare say he has n't: only he does n't talk that language any more."

Natalie made a little dissenting gesture of the hands. It asked for silence.

"You see," continued the old lady, "your kind of woman demands too much. Men can't give it. They can fetch and carry, and that looks like devotion; but it is n't what you call devotion, nor what you think they 've promised you. They swear the most extravagant things in the beginning, and you think it means love as you interpret it. You speak different languages, my dear, that 's all. Different languages! He rumbles out something in his tongue, and you hear it in yours. It 's a very good bass to your treble; but you 'd make it full harmony."

She nodded as one who knew all the stops of. life. Natalie could not answer.

"Can't you give the man a lesson?" asked Madam Walsingham. "Can't you deny him, flout him, be out when he comes, make fun of his yellow stockings and cross garters?"

"You don't understand, grandmother."

"No, I suppose you can't do that. You don't want anything that is n't yours by right. You won't play the game. But go to walk, child, go to walk. Don't get yellow."

Involuntarily Natalie started up and glanced at herself in the glass. The old lady nodded.

"You see?" she said. "It's not becoming. And it looks like jealousy, the only disease known among men for which there is no sympathy in heaven or earth. Go to walk, child, go to walk. Break your heart, if you must, but keep your complexion." She opened her book and was instantly immersed in it, chuckling to herself over the opening passage.

Natalie, seeing her absorbed, stood for a moment in thought; then she folded her work, and dropped it on the open fire. Madam Walsingham looked up at the movement, and continued the mirth evoked by her reading.

"That 's right, child," said she. "Don't be a fool. Needle and thread are no weapons for you."

"I like to sew," said Natalie obstinately.

"And don't give anybody the power of life and death over you. Get interested in things as they are. Walk, look at the sky, be a healthy little animal. Do you think if I were your age, I 'd be sighing for a man?"

Natalie gave her a quick, involuntary look.

"Yes, my dear," remarked the old lady dryly, "as you say. At your age I was doing it; but I lost my best years. Take warning, child, take warning."

Ten minutes later she saw Natalie walking down the drive, and settled herself to her book in an assured content.

Meanwhile Lorraine was tramping at an even pace, talking as rapidly, and carrying Dick's emotions with her. They had taken a wood road leading round the hill. There were shadows of a strange, translucent green upon the snow, and Dick suddenly remembered how Natalie had wondered at them another day at this same place. He put a hand on Lorraine's arm to check her talk. "Look!" he said. "The shadows on the snow!"

"Yes, pretty," she answered, with a rapid glance. "And you see, Dick, if my dancing is once really known, I shall be wanted. It will be immensely popular. There 's nothing like it. You say that yourself."

"Oh, it 's a marvel! But I hate to have you do it, even for kudos. Hang it, Lorraine, I hate it!"

"And you play wonderfully, Dick, you really do. Levinski is n't likely to leave New York this winter. He 'll get a hearing there. He won't think of me. Oh, come on, Dickie! Come and play for me!"

He laughed uneasily. Then he regarded her with attention. "Do you happen to remember, Lorraine," he asked, "that it has never occurred to you to wonder whether I have any work of my own?"

She met his look frankly; her glance was clear, its sweetness quite unblemished. "Now, you 're not going to be cross," she exclaimed sunnily.

He kicked at a root in his path, not stirring it, but with some resulting irritation to himself.

"It is curious," he mused, "curious! In all these years we 've been writing to each other, you have never once asked me what I was doing."

"Dear heart, you told me! You were in journalism."

"Well, I am in journalism still, and I can't afford to throw it over."

She stopped in the path, and her brows were knitted in a pretty frown. She seemed to be thinking; her look was abstracted, as if he and the present moment were far outside her cogitations.

"I wish you might," she said softly. "I wish you might." Her mood changed. "Where is the house in the woods?" she asked, with a quick return to the absorbing moment. "Up through this clearing? Do you know, your uncle would n't take me there?"

"Come on. I 'll take you."

They plunged up the hill through melting snow and when the log walls were before her Lorraine exclaimed at once over their charm. Dick pushed open the door, and she went in. The place was cold, and, lacking firelight, chilling to the eye.

"Move about," said Dick, "while I build a fire."

He heaped fuel together hunter-fashion, the sticks laid pyramidally to a common centre. When he was about to light it, Lorraine caught the match away from him and did it herself, with becoming pains. Then she sat down on the hearth, so near the blaze that he watched her lest she take fire. Her skin reddened from warmth, and the loose tendrils of her hair seemed to move with the climbing of the flame. Richard had thrown off his greatcoat, and sat there pondering. He wondered what she was thinking. That was an interest she was used to leaving unsated; she was inaccessible, in her sweet, unregarding way. Lorraine was a woman who kept her secrets. Yet every one knew she must have secrets to keep; there must be enormous forces concealed in one who seemed so keen an exponent of life.

She glanced up at him, surprising his answer, and her face broke into a sunny recognition.

"Nice, is n't it, Dick?" she asked.

The charm of her mounted to his brain. At the moment, she seemed to him the old Lorraine whom he had been the first to love. The haunting question of his life assailed him now, face to face with her, as it had in absence. So familiar was it to his thought and so unconsidered in his talk with Natalie, that it sprang unbidden to his lips. "Lorraine," he said.

"Yes," she answered.

The question should have followed, "Why did you throw me over?" but it halted in his mind.

"What is it, Dick?" she queried, in her bell-like tone. "What is it?"

He was silent a moment, fixing a grip on his truant will; and then he said, without a purpose, as if some force in her compelled him, —

"I 'll go with you, if you want me. I 'll play for you."

Immediately he was glad, her joy was so apparent. She rose from the hearth with one of her buoyant motions, and stood before him, breathing pleasure.

"Oh, Dick!" she murmured. "Dear old Dick!"

Dick, rather pale, looked at her and got up from his chair.

"Sit here," he said soberly. "Let us talk it over. When do you want to go?"

For an hour she sat there sketching routes, breathless and yet with great precision. She did not propose to enter advertising bureaus this year. The season was too late. She would make a tour of the smaller towns in northern New England and Canada, to get her grip, and then essay the Canadian cities and earn her notices. In the spring she would descend upon the big cities of the East. Her gayety, her absolute belief in herself, were both infectious. In five minutes Dick was as deep in the scheme as she had waded for the last half year. In his facile adaptation to the present, he bettered her instruction, and they talked in a racing antiphony and drowned each other's laughter.

The early dusk of the woods began to fall before they noted it, and all at once the mantle of it was upon them. Lorraine threw down her pencil, and leaned back in her chair with a happy sigh.

"Ah, Dickie, you 're the boy to play with," she cried, pleasure still in her voice. "I have n't seen your like since I left America."

His face sobered with a thought as sudden as his laughter. Why had she left America? If she had stayed — but again something restrained him, and he rose to get her jacket. As he held it for her, and she slipped her arms in, she turned about to him.

"Why do you get blue at a moment's notice?" she asked peremptorily. "You did n't use to."

He was putting on his own coat, and having done it he thrust his hands into the pockets and looked down at the fire.

"No, I did n't use to," he answered slowly. "I don't very often get blue, Lorraine. But when I do, it 's because I 'm thinking about you."

"Of me?" she asked, as if it were a merry jest.

"Yes. I don't understand you very well. I never did. I get speculating about it."

Lorraine had put her own hands into her little useless pockets, in a whimsical imitation. She looked very sweet, yet irresponsible.

"I 'm a simple proposition, Dickie," she announced good-naturedly.

"I don't know. I don't understand your motives. Sometimes I want to know why you do things."

Lorraine laughed.

"But what if I don't know myself? I don't. I never do. I can't split hairs — like Natalie."

The name was like a sudden little breath between them. Dick, recalled, seemed to shake himself, as if he thrust away a forbidden mood.

"Come along," said Lorraine, tugging at the door. "Come home to supper. Pouf! what a cold breath."

Dick was rather silent on the way home, and she sang bits of song, forgetting him. At the door, they met Natalie. She had been walking fast, and there was a dogged courage in her face. Dick stroked the soft fur of her jacket once, in an absent way, as he went into the hall behind her.

"Good time, Natalie?" he asked. But he did not remember to ask why she had gone alone.

They walked in together, all alive and reddened by the cold, Lorraine still singing. Mannering and his wife stood there confronting each other. They had just met in the hall, whither he had hurried, the evening paper in his grasp.

"Good God, Katharine!" he exclaimed, in a shaking voice, "do you know what 's happened?"

The others looked at him while he pointed out a page of the paper with an eager hand. "Here are two letters, long letters, signed, protesting against 'Hearts Inspired.' An immoral book, they call it, an immoral book!"

Katharine gave an involuntary glance at the others, and stepped forward as if to cut off further revelation. She felt a quick community of interest with him. This was something he could feel — it was disgrace. He, like her, she knew, must be covered with the shame of it; but his voice, directed now toward Richard, enlightened her.

"Dick, old man," he was saying, "we are made! An immoral book! By Jove! that sells it."

"It 's good for a thousand copies," said Richard indifferently.

"Good for a thousand!" echoed Mannering excitedly. "Good for ten thousand! I 'm the luckiest man in these United States."

XIII

MADAM WALSINGHAM

THE two girls ran upstairs to make ready for dinner, and Richard took a brief leave, promising to come back after his supper at the other house. Mannering, against his will, was left alone with Katharine. Yet he was really too much absorbed in the newspaper letters to give her more than an incidental thought, and that was grounded in the certainty that she, too, must be in some degree grateful for what they had received. He went back into the library, reading snatches from the letters with accompanying chuckles, and she followed him. The old captain sat there by the fire in a state of somnolent satisfaction over the imminence of dinner; but Katharine did not heed him.

"Let me see the paper," she said, and Mannering gave it to her, pointing out the column with a tremulous forefinger. Then he stood watching her, swaying his eyeglass by its cord, and balancing back and forth on the balls of his feet, in a way she hated. Even through the absorption of her reading, that little trick pursued her like a fly, and she had to resist the irritated impulse to put up a hand and brush it away. She ran rapidly over the two letters. They were from indignant women, scarifying the book in very good English. When she looked up at him, he nodded out his triumph.

"It has caught on, Katie," said he. "Don't you see it has caught on?"

She was gazing at him gravely with no emotion in her face. He felt relief. She seemed to have taken some steps on the road to reason.

"Did you mean what you said to Dick?" she asked him.

"What?"

"You said you were lucky. Do you mean to print more editions?"

"I 've got to print them. They 're called for, Katie, they 're called for. A thing like this is worth weeks of common advertising."

"I have asked you to suppress the book; I have begged you, threatened you. Last night you yielded me a point. To-day" —

Immediately he saw himself back on their old battle-ground, and he made the only feint invention recommended.

"Dinner must be ready. I 've got to go in town to-night."

"Got to go in town?" echoed the old captain, in the querulous tone of one who has received unwelcome news while dinner is still afar. Brice clutched eagerly at a change of speakers. He went over to the hearth and put a hand on his father's shoulder.

"Yes, father, yes," he said soothingly. "Business, you know, business! I 'll come out on the late train. That is, if I can make it." This he added in haste, for, with a terrified premonition, he saw Katharine sitting up for him and again wasting the night in talk. Nothing was more unusual than for him to break the habit of his orderly life by an evening trip back to town, and Katharine knew it. She stood for a moment regarding him in a thoughtful way, and then, as dinner was served, they moved out together in silence.

Lorraine enlivened the following hour, evidently quite content, though no one helped her. She talked inconsequently, like a bird fluttering from bough to bough. They were grateful to her: all, perhaps, but Madam Walsingham, to whom, on her impartial vantage ground, chatter and silence were alike a part of the game.

When Dick came in that evening, he sat down at once at the piano, but Madam Walsingham beckoned him to her place by the recessed window.

"Come here, young man," she said. "You and I must get acquainted."

Dick obeyed with a ready deference. He was by nature the friend of all who would open their minds to him, and Madam Walsingham was an unalloyed delight. He adored her picturesqueness. She piqued his love of mystery. They were alone in the room, and when she motioned him to a low chair in front of her, he felt at once flattered and confidential. Madam Walsingham settled the lace over her little hands, and regarded him with a smile he liked. But her first words surprised him.

"So you are engaged to Natalie!"

Dick hesitated a second before answering. It was not that he ignored his engagement to Natalie, even in his own mind, but it had become an integral part of life; he hardly classed it as a conventional tie. A man long married might be disconcerted by the suggestion that he should prove whether he had a wife at all.

"Yes," he said after a moment, in his best manner, "of course I am engaged to Natalie."

"How long have you been engaged?" asked Madam Walsingham confidentially.

Dick frowned; speaking by the card perplexed him. Then he answered, —

"It was the year after Lorraine went abroad."

"Ah! the year after Lorraine was married?"

He looked at her in a frank betrayal.

"Yes, Madam Walsingham."

She leaned forward, and tapped him gently on the arm.

"You were a lucky boy," she said, "to get Natalie. Tell me about it. How did it happen? But I can guess. After Lorraine was married, you came out here and talked things over."

Dick felt the comfortable warmth of her manner, and gladly yielded himself.

"Yes, Madam Walsingham. I fancy I 'd never taken much notice of Natalie before. She was younger. But then we began to talk together. And — that 's all there was about it." But certain memories did rush back upon him as he spoke, echoes silent now for years. He remembered how he had brought to Natalie the hurt Lorraine had dealt him; he remembered her passionate young warmth in comfort, and the self-forgetful sweetness with which she had accepted his trouble as a common load. The vision was confused, but it was very moving. As to Natalie, he had fallen into the habit of certainty men accord their wives. She was a tender and serviceable right hand. He never really thought of her.

"Ah," said Madam Walsingham delicately, "you 're a lucky boy! But she 's made a mistake in putting you off all these years. You ought to have married earlier."

Dick crimsoned. He threw back his head in a way he had on sudden confession. "Madam Walsingham," he said, "I 'm ashamed, but — I 've been too poor."

"Oh!" said Madam Walsingham, in soft commiseration. Then her tone changed delightfully. "Ah, well," she conceded, "Natalie does n't mind. She knows you 're working for her."

Dick had a confused sense of either censure or sympathy cunningly flavored; he could not name the brand. At that moment, Lorraine came into the room. Since she had not had time to dress carefully before dinner, she had chosen to do it after, and she was a marvel of lustrous hues softened, Richard thought with a throb of delight in her, by the foam of lace.

"Please may I have Dick, grannie?" she asked sweetly.

"No, my dear," returned Madam Walsingham, with equal sweetness. "Not for ten minutes. Go into the next room. There 's Mr. Gilbert Horne. You can amuse yourself with him. I 'll call you when you 're wanted."

Lorraine made up her face deliciously, and then went into the library, her shining drapery trailing after. She took a seat near Horne. Madam Walsingham at once smiled Richard into acquiescence.

"I did want to talk it over," she said, "it is all so interesting — you and Natalie. You know, dear young man, I don't care for these long engagements."

"Nor I," said Richard, loyally. "Heavens! nor I."

At that moment, Natalie, a slender white figure crossed the hall going also into the next room, and his eyes followed her with a keenness he felt he must interrogate in himself. Nobody had talked of their marrying. He and Natalie had not mentioned it for a long time. This balancing of accounts shocked him into a state of mind he hardly liked.

"But if there's enough pleasure in it, after all," said Madam Walsingham, tapping her knee thoughtfully with her hand, "that might compensate. It has advantages. It's the prolongation of a delightful state. It's full of flowers, courtesies, vows, the things women love most. That's as you would conceive it. But there are other men, there's another sort of man — well! well!" She smiled at him in a sympathetic condemnation of those absent lack-wits. It implied an understanding of him, one that warmed his heart.

"What kind of men?" asked Dick.

Madam Walsingham looked him in the face a moment, a smile growing upon her lips. It broadened into merriment. She leaned forward, as if she were making him an enormous confidence with which he would be proportionately pleased.

"They think," she said emphatically, in a half whisper, "that if the woman is to possess them in the end, that is enough. They omit to learn that an everlasting courtship is the secret of a woman's happiness. They think when they fail to do the little things she loves, 'Why, she's got *me!*' That's what they say, the dear, delicious things. 'She's got *me!*'" Fun lurked in her glance, mingled with a warming flattery. Richard also laughed at the men so self-deceived.

"Women have a hard time turning love into companionship," she went on reflectively, as if her mind traveled a long way back. "I had a sister once who made a great pother reconstructing herself to please the man she married. The first two years she was very happy. Then he got quite used to her and she brooded. Then she fell into that infernal state of mind where women think it 's no matter what happens to them, so some one else is suited. They were married after long waiting, I remember. The man was rather poor, and not addicted to hard work. He delayed until she inherited something. And when he took her at last, she was neither very glad nor very sorry. The splendid dash and go of it were over."

"Ah, but if they could be over they would have been over anyway," said Dick, in swift defense not of the other man, but of all men against her bitter memories. "It would have happened quite the same."

"Yes, my dear, yes," replied the old lady, "that 's a nice platitude. But at least there would have been some red blood in it. Some courage! Women don't forgive that — lack of courage. They won't say so, but it sits and eats and eats them, like the fox. The man they love must have that one thing — courage."

Dick sat looking rather pale and very thoughtful. The blank walls of decision loomed before him. Suddenly he glanced up at her.

"What became of her, Madam Walsingham?" he asked, — "your sister."

"She had a child or two," said Madam Walsingham carelessly. "They grew up. She tried despair, and did n't like it. She tried religion, and did n't care for that. Then she took to cultivating her mind. But it 's very long ago, long ago."

"Are you like her?" asked Dick, with some softness of pity, he hardly knew for what.

The old lady hesitated a moment. Then she said slowly, "I think Natalie is a little like her, as she was at one time. Now, run to Lorraine, if you want to. She 's a tempting playmate, is n't she?"

"That 's it," returned Dick heartily. "You 've hit it now. She 's a good fellow, a splendid playmate."

"Dear lad," said the old lady, again putting a detaining finger on his sleeve, "it 's partly because she 's happy. That 's her charm. And you can't make her unhappy. So her charm will be perennial. Try Natalie, just for curiosity. Make her happy over all kinds of foolish normal things and see if you don't get a playmate out of her."

"Yes," said Dick, "yes, of course." But his eyes were on Lorraine where she sat swinging her fan by a silken cord, and laughing roundly at Gilbert Horne. Natalie was to be included in the proposition, but she could wait. She was always there, and Lorraine gave the impression of willful, evanescent charm. Like the sunset she must be caught, or there would be an end.

"There is only one person likely to get any power over Lorraine," said Madam Walsingham, as he rose, "and that 's that brute Levinski."

"*What!*" His voice rang loudly. It startled him, and Natalie looked across at him from the other room.

"Not a bad fellow, but simple normal brute. He 's more selfish even than Lorraine, and the force of it fascinates her. She 'll end by marrying him. Good-night, Richard Horne. I 'm going to my room."

Dick gave her a courteous hand, and she leaned on it, walking to the stairs. There she dismissed him, and he stood for a moment thinking of Levinski before he went into the next room. There he walked up to

Natalie, reading under a lamp. The pink shade had flushed her face, and her hair was a golden wonder. She looked like some untouched spirit of the morning. Dick went round and bent to her ear.

"Natalie," he whispered, "are you pretty comfortable?"

She closed her book upon one finger and looked up at him with the smile he knew so well. It was gentle as a mother's, full of tender interest in him and his work or play.

"Here?" she asked, — "in this chair? Oh yes!"

"No! no! all the time, I mean. Are you dissatisfied?"

"Oh, no!" said Natalie, "I am not dissatisfied."

"Children!" called Lorraine, "no whispering. Come here, both of you. I want to talk to you. I 've had a letter from Levinski. You know, Dick. He 's not well, not by any means well. This climate is very bad for him. He won't be out of New York this winter. You 'll have to go, Dick. I 've told your uncle you are going."

Dick had straightened himself, and he stood looking at her, while she talked to them all with a perfect confidence in their responsive interest. Her beauty, the life in her, were like a challenge, and one that could be answered, he was sure, without dishonor. Her personal charm seemed a part of nature; it defied moralities. She was a child of the earth, not of the upper air made by our beliefs. His blood responded to her.

"Yes," he said, "I 'll go." He went over to her, and Natalie opened her book and went on reading.

Before they separated that night, Dick said to Lorraine left alone with him in the hall, —

"I did n't know your grandmother had a sister."

"No, grannie had no sister."

"Yes, one that married late, after a long engagement."

"Grannie herself married late. Her engagement was a long one."

He looked at her a moment in what seemed to Lorraine something more than wonder. "Why?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Dick. "I did n't know."

XIV

NATALIE

GILBERT HORNE went home rather early, and Natalie, who had been waiting in the dining-room, slipped out at the side door and ran after him. He heard her light step and stayed for her, under the trees. She came up to him bareheaded, and stopped beside him in the path. The black trunks of the trees cut great silhouettes upon the snow. The orchard was full of meaning, of an absorbed, solemn beauty, as if it had grown and nourished on the life of both old houses.

"Mr. Gilbert," she began breathlessly, as if she had been running far.

"What is it?"

"I wanted to ask you" — but she stopped. The silent habit of her life made it impossible to go on. His eyes had grown used to the darkness, and he spoke hastily, —

"You 've got nothing on your head, and only that thin thing over your shoulders. I dare say you 're in slippers, too."

"I wanted to ask you something," said Natalie, without heeding. "Wait one minute, till I can."

"Let me go back into the house with you."

"No, no! I can't talk there."

"Then come over with me."

"I'm not cold. Mr. Gilbert, is Dick — do you think he means to go away with her — Lorraine?"

Gilbert hesitated an instant. Then he spoke gravely. "I'm afraid so, Natalie. They are planning out the trip."

She stood quite still, her hands clenched together; but her voice shook in spite of her, as if her teeth chattered upon the words: —

"Dick has told me, of course. I knew it. But I wanted to be sure whether he really meant it, — whether you think so."

There was a great rock near the path, and Horne, while she was speaking, took her hand and lifted her upon it, so that she stood above him.

"Stay there, child," he said kindly. "If you must get your death, don't do it by freezing your feet. Yes, I fancy Dick will go."

She stood there outlined like some slender statue, the tree trunks keeping guard about her.

"When?" she asked.

"Not for a week or two. He wants to get his work into shape. He means to take his vacation now. They'll let him do it."

"Then he'll only stay two weeks?"

"They say so. They will have tried it on the smaller towns. Your sister calls it going into the provinces."

"Only two weeks!" repeated Natalie. Then her voice changed. "It will be more," she said piercingly. "The thing will succeed. Everything succeeds with her. It will be always, always!"

In his heart Horne agreed with her, but he could not say so.

"We'll see, Natalie," he ventured, but she did not heed him.

"He has no time," she went on. "If there were more time, — if he were younger — Mr. Gilbert, he is thirty now."

"Yes, Natalie."

"Good-night," she said suddenly. "Good-night, Mr. Gilbert." She stepped lightly down, and when he turned to go with her, she was vanishing through the dark. He walked on toward the house behind her and saw her go in at the side door. At that moment Richard came down from the veranda, and strode into the orchard path, whistling.

"Hallo!" he called, finding his uncle in front of him. "Hallo! I thought you went home long ago."

"Yes. Plans all made, Dick?"

"What plans?"

"Throwing over your job; trotting after Terpsichore."

"Oh come, old Gil, don't sermonize!"

"No. Plans all settled?"

They had reached the house, and Richard followed him in. He stood for a moment in the library, his hands in his pockets, his face flushed with the premonition of applause.

"I *can* play devilish well," he said, not looking up. "It would n't be bad to see what we can make of it."

They were standing before the fireplace where there was a glowing bed of coals. Cassie never let the flame fail when the master was away.

"Dick," said Gilbert suddenly, "look at me. What do you see?"

"An uncommonly nice old boy," said Dick affectionately.

"You see a failure," said Gilbert, looking still at the fire. "And I am quite comfortable in it. That 's the worst of it. You and I are very much alike, though you 've got some showy gifts I have n't. We both lack what makes the earth, in the end, worth while to a man. But no one can stand aloof from the scheme of things and not regret it. I wish there had been something big enough to kick me back into the fight."

"So you end by kicking me," said Dick, with a hand on Gilbert's shoulder. "Confound you, I 'm not in a bad way. I 'm only going touring for two weeks; then I shall return to my muttons."

"All right, Dick," said Gilbert sadly, "so long as you return."

Natalie had gone at once upstairs to her room, a large one with unfriendly furniture where she did not feel at home. She hurried into a wrapper, and then sat down by the fire, her bare feet close to the blaze. Her face fell into that drooping pallor it gained when she was alone and, as it always happened now, musing on Richard Horne. The character of her thoughts had changed, in a curious fashion, through these years which had made him the centre of her life. At first there had been a natural happiness so sweet she never now looked back to it, having an unrecognized resolve to keep that memory to feed on when she should be old. Then there had been a year of wild bewilderment because he seemed, in his contrast to that first ecstasy, not to care for her at all; and after that she had taken the road of dull endurance. In the days when she was still articulate about it, she used to put him away from her too-clinging thought, and summon the certainties that told her love was over. "He does not come to me when he wants to be happy," she would muse. "Therefore he does not love me. He does not seek his pleasures with me. He takes them with other people. He comes to me when he is in trouble, when he wants to talk about Lorraine, because he is used to coming, and because he is kind. It is not love. He does not love me."

An unnatural toughening process had begun in her, as it does in women who, after a delusive companioning, learn to live alone. But latterly all her thoughts had crowded into one channel; she wished him to succeed. She saw him forever hovering on the outskirts of the battle we call life; in his eyes, it was no warfare at all. She had ceased even to desire him for herself. That struggle was well over. He was not in any sense hers, her bitter experience told her. But like a mother who importunes heaven's largess for her child, she implored the unseen givers of gifts for him alone. In some unreasoning way, she felt almost as if her renunciation had bought something for him, at a price. To-night she reviewed the old, sad thoughts that came not savagely now, in whirling onslaught, as they used to come, but like persistent creatures bound to batter at the gate until the gate should fall. Love between them, as women think of love, was a lost cause; but something still stayed sleeplessly on guard. It was that something in her which was fighting for him. It was that which counseled her to stand beside him while he wanted her in any degree, even though the spirit of their bond were dead. But suddenly, dulled though she was to the cravings of her own spirit, she stretched her hands to heaven, and spoke aloud in a small, thin voice, —

"I am lonesome. God, I am very lonesome!"

She got up, lighted a candle, and took it to the long mirror between the windows. She leaned forward, and looked her unhappy face in the eyes. The white wrapper fell away from her slender throat, where a little chain Richard had given her lay like a vein of gold. Her red gold hair went billowing down her back, a shower she could drench herself in half over her body. There she looked for a moment, and then another.

"It is because I am not beautiful," she said. "It is because I am not beautiful."

Yet she had an honest mind, and she knew beauty was there, like a flame of fire burning with the eagerness of the spirit. She knew it was only the cruelty of life that had kept it from blossoming into the lustrous comeliness which is earth's alone. When she had believed in love, she could remember the roseate hues that lingered on her flesh, the curves her lips had taken. On those days, she had not dared regard them for their sweetness. Now she was the ghost of that young self. She set the candle on a stand beside the mirror, and brought her hair on either side of her face, a burning lustre. She bared her arms to the shoulder, and looked at them. It was a most innocent appraisement of a woman life had rejected for life's uses. Body and soul she had dedicated herself to the worship of one creature, and, she told herself dispassionately, he had never, save for the first surprise of it, felt more than the breath of that worship in his nostrils.

"Strange!" she whispered, "strange!" She walked away from her image in the glass because it was too terrible a confidant. "I have no mate," she said, going back to her seat by the fire. "I am the only creature in the world that loves so much — and I have no mate."

There was a knock at the door. She was silent, but it came again.

"Who is it?" she called.

"Lorraine."

Natalie ran to the door, and flung it open.

"Come in," she cried breathlessly. "Come! I want to look at you."

Lorraine also was in white, her thick brown hair piled loosely on the top of her head. She had yawned her face into a rosy softness.

"Bless me, Natalie, how pretty you are!" she said, dropping down before the fire and yawning again. "I wish I had your hair."

Now that she was in the room, Natalie had nothing to say to her; but she stood looking down at her with that curious fascination, half terror, Lorraine inspired in her of late. When she opened her lips, the words were quite unlike any she would have chosen.

"Lorraine, did you like your husband?"

Lorraine looked unaffectedly surprised. No one had spoken of her husband since the first month or two after his death, and her thoughts had followed the same decorous code. "Hasketh?" she asked, as if Natalie had been introducing a new person about whom they both might be a little curious. "Oh, yes, of course! Hasketh was a dear."

"What does it seem to you," urged Natalie, led on now by an irrepressible curiosity to get inside that sweet skin and think Lorraine's thoughts for a moment, "women's caring about men? Do they always care terribly?"

"Oh, no, I guess not," said Lorraine, yawning. "Are you sleepy? I want to talk about my clothes. I have three dancing dresses. Would you take them all?"

"Yes, I should take them all," said Natalie, recalled from dangerous essays. "Good-night, Lorraine. Run back to bed."

"But I'm not ready." Lorraine got up, staggering prettily with drowsiness.

"No, but you're sleepy. Go."

XV

A NEW NOTE

THE local sale of "Hearts Inspired" was something beyond precedent. Long reviews had held it up to praise and obloquy. It was stigmatized as an immoral book, and credited with rude force and glowing fancy. The writer was named in one breath with the Brontës, and again with Frenchmen whose names are rank in the nostrils. Meantime Mannering did audacious advertising. It was hardly possible to take a journey or to eat luncheon in a café, without meeting the inquiry, more or less ingeniously put, —

"Have you read 'Hearts Inspired'?"

Richard was caught by the effrontery of the affair, and, in moments of leisure, set his hand to the wheel. He wrote rhymes, comments, puns, imaginary conversations, and scattered them broadcast. Other cities caught the infection. Women's clubs began to discuss the influence of the book, and one preacher denounced it. A village contingent, primed by the press, was not to be behindhand, and poured in impetuous orders. "Hearts Inspired" was the phenomenon of the hour, and Katharine rubbed her eyes and wondered if she could be awake.

Mannering took lodgings in town, ostensibly because he was overworked, though really, as his inner self had counseled, to avoid his wife. But his fears were groundless. Since the night when he had repudiated his promise to her, she had only spoken to him incidentally about the practical details of living. She seemed to be absorbed in thoughts that kept her placid, and she wore a determined look translated by nobody but Elinor.

"I shall go, Nell," she said one morning when they both sat in her room where she had been looking over papers, assorting and destroying. Only a few bundles were left, packed into a little closet by the fire. Katharine was going through all her possessions in that way, simplifying and getting them into a small compass. Elinor had not questioned, but she knew the way the wind was sitting.

"Where shall you go?" she asked now.

"I shall go to the city, and take a little room. I shall get work."

"Can you bear it? You have had a very free life."

"I am strong," said Katharine, stretching out her hands and looking at them rejoicingly. "I can stand anything. If I can't, I don't care."

"Come abroad, Kate. Come with me. I 've got enough for both of us."

"No, Nell, no! I want to be independent. I want to be free, even from you."

Elinor smiled a little sadly to herself.

"What is it?" asked Katharine. "Why do you look like that?"

"I don't know exactly. I was thinking what happiness it is to be bound. And those that are bound want to be free. But I love your courage. You never doubt for a moment that it 's right for you to be free."

"Right!" repeated Katharine intemperately. "Right! I have n't thought of that for some time. For weeks I have been a flame of fire eating and eating the thing that keeps it down."

"We are different. It never seems to me possible to escape, except by staying and fighting out the battle."

"It is possible for me," said Katharine, an eloquent thrilling in her voice. "You need n't try to think me good. I am not going because I am sure it is right. I am going because I will go. The heavens themselves shan't keep me down. I 'll run over the horizon into the pit. Lord! Lord! for the minute I thought the world was flat."

They laughed, and then were silent.

"Are you going to let all women run over the edge when they want to?" ventured Elinor.

"I don't know. Ask the rat in a trap whether he thinks all rats ought to be free. Ask the bird in a cage whether he approves of baths in little dishes and foolish doles of seed. I don't know. Nell, I 've read 'Hearts Inspired,' read it through, cover to cover."

"What do you think of it?"

"What did you think, Nell?"

"It 's compelling. I don't know whether it 's good. It is n't good for me. It says 'Thou shalt.' I need to be told, 'Thou shalt not.'"

"Perhaps, — but I 've never had any morals. I don't want to do wrong things, but I want to do the things I was made to do."

"But 'Hearts Inspired'?"

"Yes, Nell, there 's power in it."

"I know it. Too much."

Katharine clasped her hands about her knees, and looked into the fire.

"Perhaps I can do another book," she said, with that mounting courage of hers, always catching at the fleeing future. She laughed a little. "If you and Gilbert Horne will teach me not to be immoral! You see, Nell, I 'm deficient, somehow. These lying, cheating things seem to me the wrong ones. To stay with a man when you hate him — that seems to me the basest thing."

"Have you told Gilbert Horne?"

"What?"

"About leaving Brice."

"No." She spoke in a low tone, and immediately they both felt the chill of some air not to be penetrated further.

"May I talk to him?" asked Elinor.

"Why should you talk to him?"

"I don't know. I want to hear what he would say. He has known you better than I, these last years."

Katharine got up, her face eloquently moved.

"He was all I had," she said, — "all."

She walked away out of the room, and Elinor made herself busy to ignore impressions she had no right to keep. When she went down into the library, she found Katharine there before her, with Madam Walsingham. The old lady was saying from her place beside the fire, —

"Well, Mistress Katharine, I 've read the wonderful book."

"What book?" asked Katharine, with a courteous perversity.

"'Hearts Inspired.' A silly piece of business!"

Honest as she was in her repudiation of the book, Katharine felt the pang of the mother who sees her child assailed and who, in hot instinct, flies to its defense. The old lady was holding the red book in her lap. As she talked, she turned it over in her delicate hands, and Katharine felt, for the moment, as if those keen eyes could pierce the cover and read her name on every page.

"The proposition is wrong, all wrong," said Madam Walsingham. "I never can see why women are always assuming that the only medicine for shipwreck with one man is to set sail with another."

"Is n't it natural?" asked Elinor, to draw the fire from Katharine. "You repudiate the false because you find something that seems true."

"Ah, but it 's in the relation itself," declared the old lady, striking her fist upon the book, in an unwonted passion. "It 's the bond. Why won't any of you see that a husband 's a husband? You take a problematic man and make a wonder of him. Turn him into a husband, and he 's no such matter."

A flush mounted to Elinor's cheeks. It was the hue of roses. "Madam Walsingham," she said, with a beautiful deference, "I cannot let you say that. I cannot."

Natalie had come into the room and, caught by the significance of the scene, stayed, listening. Elinor stood straight and tall, her eyes burning with pure fire.

"I have seen it," she said, "marriage. I know a great deal about the way people love each other and serve each other and adore the bond — no, they think nothing about the bond, it is so natural. I have seen it among the simplest peasants, worn by hard work, browned in the sun, seamed with life — but the way those old hands clasp each other — Oh, Madam Walsingham!" Her voice choked with the tears in it, and she stopped, silenced by her own inadequacy. Natalie had gone swiftly round, and stood beside her, as if she ranged herself in bold alliance. To her starved heart, such words were like the breath of life. She touched the sacrament and for the first time broke the bread with another woman who confessed to the same worship. Madam Walsingham laughed a little, kindly.

"Bless your heart, my dear, how pretty you are!" she said. "Why did n't you let me finish? A husband's a husband. That's my first proposition. Accept him, but don't deify him. Make a civil contract for the good of the community, and abide by it. But don't arrange a system of worship, and eat your heart out because the man does n't conform to it. He won't. He can't."

Elinor had grown pale now, and she spoke gently.

"Yet, Madam Walsingham, you must leave us that worship. It means something. A great Italian told me once that this overplus of love in women is like pollen on the flowers. It is not all used. It is spilled, wasted. But some of it goes to fruit."

"You come here, my dear," said the old lady. "Give me your hand. There!" she kissed it lightly. "You're an angelic advocate. It's no credit to you. You've caught sainthood from the sky and pictures, down there in your Italy. It's an infection. But I kiss your hand."

Elinor, with a pretty blush and great confusion, made her a low curtsy and returned the homage. Then they settled to talking of lighter things; but Natalie went out of the room, her heart exalted. Nobody in the household spoke in this fashion, with full belief and bold assurance. It was like noble music. She felt her blood respond to the beat and rhythm, and knew she was equal to what might be demanded of her. Such heartening was a gift from God.

That evening Richard, who had not yet spoken to her about his going, drew her out on the veranda when Lorraine had run upstairs to get some music.

"Come and walk a little," he said, and she responded gently. Of late she had fortified herself, when he was with her, by a gayer manner; but Elinor's call had moved her to a great sincerity.

Elinor was one of the people, who through long self-communion, have learned to speak simply of grave things. The life of the soul was her commonplace; and those who were thrown with her accepted it unconsciously, like a change in atmosphere.

Dick and Natalie walked up and down with the according step that had grown out of their long companionship. He was serious and a little apprehensive. Since his talk with Madam Walsingham, he had wondered whether Natalie might be dissatisfied.

"Has Lorraine talked to you about our tour?" he asked.

"Yes, Dick. You 've both talked of it before us all."

"I know, — but particularly?"

"No, there was nothing in particular to say."

"It 's only for two weeks, Natalie." He believed that, yet as he said it the words sounded like paltering, and he was impatient with them. She put aside the question of his going, not with any palpable effort, but so that he felt the finality of her withdrawal.

"How is it about Fiske and Bailey?" she asked. "Will they sell?"

"Oh, yes, they 'll sell!"

"Are they negotiating with anybody?"

"A New York man has been on to talk about it."

"Don't you want the business, Dick? Don't you still think of it?"

His mind had been on other things for the last week, but he honestly did want it.

"That 's no use," he said. "It 's as far from me as the Pleiades."

She looked up at them in their mysterious tangle, and the heavens seemed with the earth in league to keep him near her.

"Don't you think" — she hesitated, "Uncle Gilbert would back you up?"

"I don't honestly think he can, Natalie. I 've chaffed him about it, and he 's chaffed me, but I believe he 's rather water-logged. There are things he can't realize on — mortgages and things. No, he can't. He 's eternally being bled. I won't bleed him."

"Is n't there any man you could go in with? A man with capital?"

"I don't know any."

"You are so clever, Dick! A man with money ought to buy your brains. There 's cousin Brice — he 's making a lot out of that new book."

Dick laughed with a reminiscent tang including his past and present knowledge of Brice Mannering.

"By Jove, he is!" he owned. "Old Sally would say, 'It 's more by hit than good wit.'"

"You 've given the book a lift. I 've seen that. Get Brice to go in with you and buy out Fiske and Bailey."

"Bless you, child, he 's erected a publishing house of his own on the strength of 'Hearts Inspired.' It 's in the air yet, but he sees it. He 's so cocky you can't touch him with a ten-foot pole. No partnerships for him! And he has n't done so badly, old Brice. It 's the wisdom of fools; but he 's got a pile of money out of 'Hearts Inspired.'"

She put her hand on his arm with a timid intimacy.

"Dick," she ventured, "Dick, you don't know any man — would you take a woman? Would you take her money? You would manage the business. It would be in your name. She 'd stand aside and share the profits."

"You bet I would," said Dick impartially. "But there 's no such woman. Did you want me, Lorraine? Do you want us?"

She had opened the door, and stood there under the lamp, bareheaded.

"No," she said. "I want to come, too. I 'll get a cloak."

"But you never approved of my going into publishing at all," continued Dick to Natalie, with his sweet-natured courtesy returning to their talk, though now, with Lorraine at hand, the interest had gone out of it. "You told me to go West and be a cowboy."

"But you would n't be a cowboy!"

"No."

"This is second best. If you won't have what I want, I want you to have what you want."

He laughed.

"Well, I 've got something for the next two weeks — pianist for Madame Lorraine! Wish me luck, Natalie. Honestly, I 'm awfully taken with the job."

"I do wish you luck," she answered softly. "I do wish it."

She drew her hand from his arm, and running in, gave him a friendly nod from the doorway. Lorraine, muffled in furs, came out, and she and Dick walked for an hour, laughing like children over nothing but each other's company.

XVI

A DUAL SOLITUDE

Gilbert Horne walked to the library window and looked at the snowy sky, and then returned to his chair and tried to read. But the day with its miracle show of great flakes sifting through a brightened air, recalled him again and again from the unwelcome page. Ever since luck had excused him from going West, he was especially delighted with his house and the ways of life in it. Now, he thought, he might be allowed to sink root here in his own place, and be stirred no more. And yet to-day, dwelling on this for the thousandth time, he had longings to be gone. His feet tingled for motion, and when the snow stopped like magic and white clouds rolled up from a brilliant west, he threw down the book and summoned Cassie, whose low singing he heard from the hall. She was rubbing old mahogany furniture to a deeper glow, doing it as she did everything there, as if she loved the house.

"Cassie!" he called, "Cassie! Run and put me up a luncheon."

She came to the door and stood there with her strong hands on either side of the casing, her eyes seeking him with the benignant look mothers give the beings they love best on earth. It protected while it adored a creature who had no idea of ever needing more than a casual service.

"Yes," she answered, "I guess I can." She had no prescribed methods of speech, and yet her manner was perfect. She was not so much a servant as a handmaiden, a woman born out of sound stock like his own, and his equal in everything save her humility toward him. Horne had risen, and stood there smiling at her. He never consciously thought of Cassie, more than of the good bread old Sally made for his dinner. She was a wholesome, sweet thing, and she was his in a way Sally was his, and the fire and his book.

"I want a good solid luncheon for two," he said.

Her eyes brightened with a sudden pleasure. Once he had taken her down to the logging camp in winter, and they had built a fire out of doors.

He ticked off the items on his palm: "Bread and butter, thin. You might make it sandwiches, though. And cake, or something fancy. Some coffee and cups, — two. I 'll fish out a bottle of wine."

"You want the bread and butter thin?" asked Cassie, with a careful courtesy.

"Yes, have the whole thing nice, delicate, you know, tempting. And put in some napkins."

She nodded and went away, the lift of her head subdued into a little droop. Gilbert ran down cellar whistling, and came up with wine and apples. When Cassie brought in the sandwiches from the kitchen, he helped her pack them, and they had great merriment, making a neat hamper. She had recovered her gentle spirits, and Gilbert stopped once in their work to say, —

"You 're a good girl, Cassie."

He thought at the instant rather seriously how she and old Sally, in their unobtrusive service, had smoothed his way of life. They suited him. They were intimates, and yet not near enough to stir that uneasy consciousness of his, ready to shrink from any hint of bonds. Old Sally, standing in the doorway, puffing at her pipe and advising, turned at that and went into the kitchen, as if she had guessed what hurt her; but Cassie only fitted an egg into its place with smooth precision, and hardly seemed to hear. Gilbert left the last touches to her, and while old John, the other servitor, harnessed, he went through the orchard path to the Mannerings'. Elinor sat there at the window as if she expected him; and with a boyish sense that this was unlike other days when luncheons were not waiting, he took off his hat and beckoned her. She pushed up the window.

"I'll be round in ten minutes with the horse," said Gilbert. "Take a lot of wraps. We shan't be home till sundown."

Before her answer, he was striding back again, to forestall denial; but there was no more chance of that than there had been years ago when he summoned her to play.

Elinor shut the window and ran up to her room. When she came out, her face carried the brightness of hurry and anticipated joy. Katharine was on the landing.

"Kate, dear!" she spoke with a delightful appeal and a haste that became her like a charm. "Kate, he's going to take me sleighing. We shan't be home till night.'

"He?"

"Gilbert Horne! Oh, kiss me, Kate! Good-by."

She lifted a face all trembling from pure pleasure, and Katharine kissed her softly, with a little wonder. She had not seen Elinor so moved by any happy fortune, and quite impressed by the magnitude of the event, she went down with her, when Horne came, and tucked her into the sleigh.

The day was dazzling now. Very little snow had fallen, but it lay in delusive softness, as if it covered an uncounted depth, and shone with the faceted brilliancy of new crystals. Lady, Gilbert's dearest horse, was keen of nostril and of an unquenched spirit. For a mile or more she spent her breath wildly, and then, calming to the road, fell into a steady pace. Gilbert turned to look at Elinor. She was pink with pleasure, and he noted the pure curve of her cheek, and the sweep of her lashes outlined there. She reminded him subtly of Cassie. No two women could have been more unlike, yet something at that moment suggested a kindred mind.

"Well," said he, "here we are."

"Where are we going?"

"Do you care?"

"Not in the least."

"I thought not. But it 's miles and miles. You need n't talk. You can forget me, if you like."

"We 'll forget each other."

They had slipped smoothly down the road to the village, and traversing that valley, crawled up another hill. This brought them to the upper tableland, Edgcombe's peer in height, where a long road, lined with maples, ran away to the east. The horse had settled into the smooth trot that lasts all day, and the bells and hoof-beats in according measure lulled Elinor to reverie.

"If it would never end!" she kept saying to herself. "Oh, it must never end!"

They had gone, as he promised, miles and miles, when they dipped into deep woods where the road lay in thick green shadow. Horne drew an impetuous breath.

"Did you forget me?" he asked, against his will.

The day itself made a temptation: that and their companionship in solitude. It challenged truth. She was on the point of answering with an absolute candor, "I never forget you," but something recalled her, an echo of his voice that other day as he said he was content. If he were content, he had no need of her, and she refused this drop from the overbrimming cup filled from sunlight and winter air.

"Smell the firs," she said. "I've driven through here in summer when they were like incense."

"Yes, in summer time. You can't smell them through this frost."

"Oh, yes, I can! So can you. I used to think, when I read your books in Italy, that you could hear the grass grow and the roots stirring under the ice."

"Strange! you had my books in Italy! Why did you?"

"I told you. I got everything I could to remind me of home."

"Were you contented there?"

"Not for a minute."

"Why did you stay?"

"My father had to. It was life and death with him, he thought."

"He thought! I wonder if it was!"

"I am not sure. But we stayed."

"It does n't seem right to me," said Horne. "It does n't seem right. The older life has no right to overlap the younger so."

"Yet you let it."

"Oh, I! That 's not important. It was different with you. You should have been saved."

"I did n't ask to be saved," returned Elinor quietly. Her mind added, "And there was no one to save me."

"I wonder who could have done it," said Gilbert Horne musingly. "Was there any one?"

There seemed to be no reason why he should not ask her anything out there in the snowy day. He felt a great desire to be near her, to learn her past, and lay some finger on her present life. But she evidently found no argument for answering, and he spoke again in the same musing tone.

"And all that time I thought of you as happy!"

"I was happy, after the first."

"What was it at the first?"

"I was doing what we all have to do. I was learning to submit."

"Submit! to what?" cried Horne impatiently. "Why must you have submitted? Why could n't you have the things women yearn for?"

She smiled into the face of the lovely day.

"Why not?" she asked, and then added with a commonplace humility, "It was not possible, or I should have had them."

"You believe in higher powers!"

"You mean in God? Yes. It is very simple. We are His children. He decides."

"Submit! I have submitted until I end by not wanting anything," said Horne violently. "It 's a hideous retribution."

"Did you know Kate means to leave her husband?"

"What!"

"She said I might tell you. She is going to leave Brice."

"What for? Not that wretched business of the book?"

"That hurried it. But she has been planning it for years. Now the time has come."

"I 'm sorry, sorry," said Horne slowly. "I wish she could have fought it out."

"Why?"

"I don't know why; but I 've a good deal of confidence in things that are lived out on the spot. Mannering 's a foolish fellow, but he 's not so farcical as she thinks him."

"Is n't the book enough to part them?"

"I don't know. It 's an accomplished fact. She can't help it. He 's done a faithless thing based on a foolish thing she did before him. She should n't found a tragedy on it. You see I 'm sorry for Mannering. I shall be, if she leaves him."

"Do you expect him to suffer?"

"Not what she calls suffering, not what you call suffering. He 's pitched too low. But that kind of nature has a discomfort you vivid creatures don't give us credit for. I gave up something once. I know."

She glanced at him quickly. His face was a little sad, a little whimsical, as if even that old pain he would not take quite seriously.

"I never meant to tell you," he went on presently.

"It 's unfair, too, now I 've got you here where you can't get away. But somehow the devil is in it, and I want to. You see, years ago I gave up you."

The world held still, thought Elinor, as she did, listening.

"I cared about you," he said. "When you went away to Italy, I gave you up. I mooned over you for years. I fancy I 'm rather different in some ways because of that. But at the time it was remarkably difficult."

As she was silent still, he looked at her.

"Gods of war!" he cried, "you 're laughing. You wretched woman, you unfeeling jade! What makes you laugh?"

The tension of years had broken in her. Dimples came in her face and made it childlike, and two tears wet her cheeks. Gilbert laughed a little unwillingly, through extreme surprise.

"You hurt my vanity," he said. "I tell you I liked you, and you laugh!"

With Elinor, used to her meditative life alone, all the small things and the great in life meant God. Now God had given something back to her, and so simply, so humanly, that it transcended anything she ever asked. The doubt of years was over. The man had cared about her. That he cared no longer seemed a little thing. He was here, saner than she, because he had no visions, and he had loved her. The beautiful fantasy of her old dream resolved itself into a sweet new knowledge. It promised nothing for the future, and she desired nothing. Only the dream had once been true, and it made the fabric of her life complete.

"Faster!" she urged. "We go into the gully here, I remember."

He gave the word and Lady flew; but only for half a mile, because he would not have her heated for her stall. A turn in the road, and a little low house.

"You don't remember?" asked Gilbert hopefully.

"Oh, yes, I do! The old clock man used to live here. You gave him the use of the house."

"He lives here still. There 's no smoke. He 's off on a tramp. Let me get Lady under cover, and then I 'll make a fire."

Elinor pushed her way into the house and found the kitchen empty. It was a south room full of sun, curiously bare, and very clean. There was a long work-bench by the window, covered with tools. There were clocks everywhere, but they were still. She opened the wood-box and found kindling, and when Gilbert came in the fire was crackling. He put down the hamper and a great bundle with it.

"Books," he said, answering her glance. "Novels. He asks me if they are true, and I tell him yes."

The little room was presently humming with heat. Gilbert threw off his coat, and began opening the hamper.

"Ah, let me!" she begged.

"You? You 're not a housewife."

She drew it to her side of the table, and went to work.

"Aha!" she cried in triumph. "You were doing it all backwards. Where was your tablecloth?"

She had espied it with the napkins fitted cleverly in by the other woman's faithful fingers. Gilbert stood aside and watched her while she spread the cloth and set out the sandwiches and wine. He found her a little clean saucepan, and she heated the coffee; when it was steaming, they sat down to eat. He looked at her across the table and raised his glass.

"To your beautiful eyes!" said the look, and she read it as she did all his involuntary messages.

There was a curious intimacy in their seclusion and their breaking bread together. When she rehearsed it afterwards, in the fashion women have of taking out their memories to fondle, Elinor would tremble a little over the sacramental touch of it; but now it was merely commonplace, in some sweet, human way. The little house seemed to enfold as it did inclose them. There was slight space for even the thought of others in that dual solitude. Yet they spoke freely of the absent, and with the candor of a perfect trust; only it was like one mind communing with itself, and finding the rest of the world, though dear and friendly, very far removed. When they had eaten, they sat down on either side of the little impetuous stove, and kept on talking about everything, about nothing. They were two silent people who by nature broke speech in each other's company. At three, the sun was out of the side window, and Gilbert looked at her.

"Is it over?" she asked, smiling back.

"It 's over. I 'll put Lady in."

While he was gone, she set the chairs straight, tidied the room, and shut the stove. When he brought the horse round, she was waiting for him, and her face dimpled.

"What is it?" asked Gilbert.

"Go and listen at the door. Listen hard. You 'll hear."

He opened the door, and set his ear to the crack.

"Clocks!" he reported. "How many?"

"Eight." She had wound them, and they were ticking in a droll and clamorous gratitude. It made the little house less lonesome to be left. Small understanding voices seemed to be calling them to come back and go on talking.

XVII

BRICE AND NATALIE

There was something romantic in Natalie's longing to send Dick into the modern West, to get the taste and smell of life. That country, as she saw it, was a great creature holding out warm arms. The limitless horizon, the wide sky, gripped her imagination, and she saw him toughening in wind and sun, and growing at one bound into the man she meant him to be. Gilbert Horne had favored the scheme because it fell in with his own certainty of the medicine needed, not so many years ago, to correct his own faults of purpose. Dick and he were not so unlike, though he had, as he had said, the slower nature. At heart, they both lacked some comprehension of life in the present, some ability to cope briskly with the issues of the hour. Gilbert lagged on certain roads. He did not pursue false gods, but he sought out no gods at all until they had been with him for a long time, thundering from the brake. Then he was too embarrassed for worship. To neither of them did the apparent prizes of life look very desirable at the time for snatching at them. Only when his day was over did Gilbert gaze wistfully at other men who had found them worth while, and wish he had struggled like the rest. Yet, as he had told Elinor, he was not unhappy. A tree was more to him than a blustering opponent in debate. He sometimes inquired curiously into the future and saw possibility of great happiness of a tranquil kind, in growing old, in feeling his pulses beat more and more slowly, and his blood run cooler with the autumn sun; but at the same time there lurked within him a suspicion that it would have been better to play the game, to taste life as other men had agreed to make it. Dick, he said, following Natalie's unspoken wish, should taste it for him. He had an entire comprehension of Natalie's mind toward Dick. He was sensitive to life, and the men and women in it were wonderfully clear to him; only when they touched his own being, their motives blurred and faded. He could respond intelligently to moods without being deeply affected by them, though he always felt safer, more competent with the natural world than the congregation of men. As his own character seemed to him a complete puzzle, so human creatures, when they took him into their circle, ceased to be a play. Only in relation to one another did they move consistently, and rid him of that perplexity which beset his lonely path.

But he understood Natalie very well, and longed to make her happy in the measure of her past dissatisfaction. He understood Dick, and required him to put away childish things; and, for a time, it seemed as if the West were to be the salvation of them all. But Dick had not considered it for a moment; and now, at thirty, with apparently infinite riches of time before him, he was henchman to Lorraine.

One thing they knew: Dick had wanted to buy out Fiske and Bailey, and now Natalie wanted it as much as he. Give him a big desire, she thought, and it might steady him. There had always been a resentful shame in her at dabbling with his future as that of a man not fit to map it out himself. Desiring nothing so much as his good fortune, she would yet have had it wrested by his own hand from the indifferent gods. Every day of her life she had wished to give him her own little money; still that could hardly be done without offering him herself, and there she shrank. He did not want her. But now all lesser pride was drowned in the one wish to save him.

It was an evening almost as light outside as in, with the moon on the snow and a clear cold from the north. There had been wind for three days, and now it had died, leaving peace behind it. Natalie, her nerves on edge from that invisible pursuer, had suffered uneasy torment; but the tension slackened and she lived again. She came downstairs and found the others, under the same reaction, exhilarated according to their kind. Elinor and Katharine were talking together in a window seat, and Madam Walsingham sat by the fire, her little feet tucked close to the blaze. She was reading, and Dick went over some music for Lorraine, with rigid insistence on beat and rhythm. Mannering was at home for the first time in ten days, and he sat in the library in his old chair, his father across the hearth, and read the paper with a contented certainty that now at last Katharine had accepted the book as a concession to finance. Natalie stood in the doorway.

"Cousin Brice, may I talk to you?" she asked.

Mannering put down his paper.

"Of course, Natalie, of course," he said cordially. "Come in; take this chair."

He belonged to that school of gallantry which prescribes offering one's own chair to a lady, as if no seat will serve without a personal sacrifice. But Natalie brought forward a little ottoman and placed it in the open fire space between the two.

"My son has not been home for nine nights," said the captain, in senile fractiousness. He had missed Brice extraordinarily. All the habits of his life were broken in upon when the one culmination of the day, his son's return, had been denied him. He had aged even in a week, and Brice, seeing it, tried pathetically to coax him back into his lost serenity.

"Business, father, business," he chanted. "I 'm running a successful book."

"Not for nine nights!" repeated the old man. "Nine nights!" His volume of Homer lay on the table before him. It had been closed all day. When Brice was not to come, he wandered about the house, and felt his own forlornness.

"Business!" said Brice again briskly. "You and I are going abroad on that book, father. We 're going to Greece."

He nodded at Natalie as if to include her in this assuaging policy; but she had no eyes for him save as he touched her purpose.

"Cousin Brice," she began, "I want some money."

Brice stiffened, as if she coaxed it from his pocket. That was his custom, a vindication of his own importance. Natalie had never asked him for money without receiving it as a gift accompanied by the implication that it was a difficult piece of business to achieve. But he spoke jocosely.

"Quarter day is a good ways off."

"I know it is. But I don't want the usual payment — I want it all. You know the will specified that you were to make over the whole thing to me when I was twenty-one. I did n't want it then. I want it now."

Mannering's pallor was intense; it held a shade of green. He trifled with his glasses, and then tapped his chin with them and looked judicial. He spoke gravely, with an importance calculated to delay.

"I hope you 're not dissatisfied?"

"Dissatisfied! No! I only want the money."

"You want the money!" repeated Mannering.

"I want the money. Is there any reason why I should n't have it?"

"No reason in the world." But he looked uncomfortable, as one who, at a time when he can ill afford it, has received a blow. Then his face cleared, and he took up his newspaper as if to close the topic. "I will attend to it at once."

"You know I have a list of the investments," said Natalie. "I don't believe it will cause you much trouble. I want the whole thing cleared up and the money made over to me, so I can use it, if I like."

Mannering put on his glasses; but he took them off to question her.

"Are you intending to leave us?" he asked, and Natalie understood he meant her marriage.

"No," she answered quietly. "I shall stay here as long as you like."

"Delighted," said Brice cordially, returning to his paper; and the old captain smiled at her and added, —

"You stay. We must all stay. I don't like changes. My son was away nine nights."

She went into the next room, where Dick and Lorraine were standing together near the fire. Madam Walsingham had laid her book in her lap, and was smoothing the lace over her wrists. She was saying with an unmoved calmness, —

"No, Lorraine, I shan't go to-morrow, nor the next day, nor the day after."

Katharine hurried forward from her seat in the window.

"Don't think of going, Madam Walsingham," she urged, with an honest warmth of courtesy. "I wish we might keep you as long as — any of us are here." The subterfuge seemed a natural expression, but she had thought, at the moment of speaking, how her own desire counseled her to be out of the house before the spring.

"But, grannie! grannie!" cried Lorraine, her unfailing good-nature covering her unfailing will, "our plans are all made. Dick has his leave of absence. The winter will be over. Nobody wants dancing in Lent. Grannie! grannie!"

Madam Walsingham took up her book conclusively.

"Thank you, Madam Katharine," she said. "I will extend my visit a little longer. Lorraine, my dear child, I really have got to live for a few more days in a civilized house; otherwise I shall come unglued before the winter is over. I don't propose to die for a year and a half. My horoscope gives me that. I am turned out to grass here. I intend staying until my coat gets a little smoother and my hoofs are rested. Thank you, Madam Katharine."

"But, grannie! grannie! Dick and I have got to go. We can't go alone!" Madam Walsingham had returned to her book, and Katharine to her talk in the window. Lorraine made a little face, as she did sometimes when fate crossed her briefly. Then she laughed.

"Bless me, Dick," said she, "you 'll have to marry me."

XVIII

A PAIR OF GLOVES

GILBERT HORNE had fallen in with one of Lorraine's fancies. When she told him the great room in his third story would make a dancing hall, he invited her to try it. He had been looking at Natalie's face, and it seemed to him that whatever deferred Lorraine's going, with Dick at her heels, might be worth some trouble.

Old Sally and John were commissioned to put the room in order. It ran the length of the house, divided midway by a fireplace where a log had space to burn. There were divans in the end windows, and along the sides were cabinets filled with specimens from the days when Gilbert had meant to be a naturalist. Now they were curtained in deep red. Late one afternoon, on the day after his drive with Elinor, the place was ready, and he went up and laid the fire himself. The logs were piled beside the hearth, and the room, with the brown rafters above and the low light from the west creeping in at the window, looked ancient and most inviting. Here Gilbert had used to walk with his mother, on winter days when she felt a terror of the outdoor world, and it was for her that he had had the partitions torn away, and the spot made habitable. He stood before the fireplace now and looked up and down its length, his mind traveling back as he seldom let it wander, because the path led through a dreary plain. He could see himself and his mother, like two creatures quite detached from him, as they walked back and forth, she always leaning on him, always rehearsing the things she could not bear, and he answering with reassurances long since grown commonplace. He turned from the picture with a strong distaste. He had not liked his life as destiny and he had made it; but it was a part of his nature to endure. Presently he went downstairs and Cassie met him in the dining-room where she had just set out his tea.

"What is it, Cassie?" he asked at once. "What 's happened?"

That look of high excitement had used to be on her face when his mother, in hysteria, tried him too far, and Cassie, though she had to be silent, was his champion. But he never connected it with any emotion touching him: only with something stirring in the air.

"Nothing," answered Cassie.

He sat down and began breaking his toast thoughtfully, caring little about it, and the girl stood still. In a moment she laid beside him something she had held in the hand hanging at her side.

"What is it?" asked Gilbert.

"It is a pair of gloves. I went out to the sleigh to bring in the hamper and I found them."

"Oh!" He had awakened. They were Elinor's gloves, fallen from the inner pocket of her cloak. Gilbert looked at them casually, as they lay there on the cloth beside him. "Yes," he said, "much obliged."

Cassie drew a deep breath and went away into the kitchen. She knew he would touch them, but she hardly felt able to see him do it. Gilbert finished his supper, and then got up and stretched himself with the frank enjoyment of the man used to being much alone. Then he did look at the gloves thoughtfully; he took them up and carried them into the library, where his lamp was burning. And when he was in his chair, book in hand, the gloves lay on the table beside him. Cassie cleared away the dishes with a mechanical interest, but her glance kept note of him; and when she had carried the last thing into the kitchen, she returned, closed the door behind her and stood there in the shadow watching him. And the event followed, as if her spirit summoned his to tell its story; for Gilbert laid down his book and took up the gloves. He unrolled them with a gentle care, as if they might be hurt. Then he smoothed out their delicate length, and put them to his face. Cassie saw him lay his cheek upon them. She opened the door stealthily and went back into the kitchen. Old Sally, washing dishes at the sink, saw her white face with the burning eyes, and knew something was undone. But they finished the work in silence, and then sat down on either side of the stove. Sally smoked her short pipe and looked at the fire, where the draught in front showed a gleam of coals.

"Plague take this fire!" she said at last. "I'd like a good hearth where I could see the embers."

Cassie did not answer. She leaned back wearily in the great chair. Her arms hung at her side, and the strong hands were limp. Yet she was not tired. This was an abandonment, but not that of weakness.

"You could set in the other room," said Sally artfully. "He said so. He 'd let us both set there; on'y I 'll be whipped if I 'll go where folks can be runnin' in."

"No," said Cassie. "No. I shan't sit there." Suddenly she awoke to fierce avowal: "I 'm going away."

"Where ye goin'?" asked old Sally, puffing steadily at her pipe.

"I don't know. Maybe down to your old house at the Ridge."

"I 'll go with ye."

"No! no! You stay here."

Sally answered her thought.

"Yes, he could, too. He could git along without me. He 'd think he could n't; but he could. They never want to be weaned; but you can do it, an' arter it 's done, they 're all the better for 't."

She rose, knocked the ashes from her pipe and laid it on the shelf. Cassie was thinking her own thoughts. Her young look had slipped away, and left her in a grave maturity. She betrayed the woman she would be twenty years from now unless life fondled her: a sad-faced creature, yet all sweetness, as one who had accepted a part she did not comprehend. Old Sally took a candle, and limped out of the room. Presently she came back. She blew out the light, and pinched the wick with capable, worn fingers; then she came up to Cassie and held out something. It was a little black bottle, and Cassie looked at it without much interest.

"What is it?" she asked.

There was cause for secrecy, and yet old Sally scorned to whisper. The facts of life, even those least understood, were all acceptable to her, and she dealt in charms when there was need, as she would make a loaf of bread.

"It 's a philter," said she. "It 's a love philter."

Cassie reddened all over her face. She rose in her chair and took the thing. Old Sally saw that, in some access of young passion, she was about to throw it on the hearth, and she put one sinewy hand on Cassie's wrist.

"Don't ye," said she, "don't ye! It 'll make a smell."

The girl shook off her hand; but now she held the bottle closer in her palm. Her grasp concealed it there. Sally turned away, and lighted her candle again.

"Great-aunt Lois gi'n it to me," she said. "I never used it. Lord! I never wanted their love. What 's love? Ratsbean! One 's as bad as t' other. But I 'm gittin' old. I thought I 'd pass it along to you. When you git old, you hand it along to the next one. Ten drops in their tea, three nights runnin'."

She lighted the candle and poked the wick this way and that with a finger too tough to feel the flame; then, with it burning valiantly, she went up the kitchen stairs to bed.

Cassie leaned back in her chair and held the thing in the hand hanging at her side. It seemed to burn her, but her grasp grew firm. At ten, Gilbert, sleepy from the winter wind in his face nearly all day long, walked about shutting up the house. He went into the kitchen last, and finding it dark tried the doors, and then shot the bolts upon them. The great chair was black beside the hearth, and the room had rapidly grown cold. He had that sense of a presence which comes upon us sometimes in the dark.

"Cassie!" he called softly.

There was no answer, and he went to push the chair away. Then she started up from it, and cried out hurriedly,—

"Yes! yes! I'm going. I'll go now."

"Why, Cassie, child! You've been asleep."

She had slipped like a swift shadow to the stairs, and was groping up without a light. The chill of the room struck upon him, and he called after her, "Cassie, you should n't act so. Why in thunder can't you sit in a warm room, or else keep up a fire?" But hearing the door of her chamber close behind her, he only grumbled a little at the foolishness of women who have divine instinct over others' comfort while they neglect their own. He went off to bed; but old Sally, in the middle of the night, heard a woman's crying, and crept to Cassie's door. She stayed there a moment with chilling feet, and then stole back again and drew her flannel petticoat into bed with her for warmth. Sally lay awake into the early dawn and felt none the worse. She needed very little sleep now, and she had a great deal of thinking to do, life seemed to her so curious.

"Lord! Lord!" said Sally, when she got up and dressed. "The world ain't never goin' to stop turnin' round." By which she meant that it was more or less amazing to see the tears of her youth in the tears of youth again.

All that day Cassie went about the work with her fine precision, neglecting nothing. Sally watched her a little, and then, feeling in her the ebb of passion, judged that the girl was strong. Cassie did not think very much that day, but she carried the little bottle in her pocket, and it talked to her like a spirit. She dusted the library, and looked in a drawer and a cabinet for the gloves. They were not there. Gilbert had one of his silent days when he stayed about the house like a cat, and went no farther than the road for air. But at twilight Dick came, and Cassie saw them meeting on the veranda, and heard Gilbert say:

"I 'm going for a half mile run. Back to supper."

"I shall eat with the Mannerings," said Dick. "Mrs. Mannering just asked me."

"Then tell them the dancing hall is ready. She can use it to-night, if she likes. Bring them over. If I 'm not there, light the fire and go ahead."

They walked down the drive together, and Cassie saw them parting at the gate. Gilbert went lunging into the dusk, as if his legs cried for action. She knew the Mannerings would be over in two hours at the most, Elinor among them with her fragile yet invincible beauty; and the little bottle spoke in her pocket.

Old Sally made biscuits that night, and fretted because Gilbert did not come to eat them. Cassie said nothing; but she watched from the west window, and when she heard the whistle he always gave when he had sinned against supper and expected it to be ready for him, she brought hot dishes to the table and poured his cup of tea. And as if she must do a certain act because her thoughts had grown into a compelling army, she took the little bottle from her pocket and began dropping the ten drops into his cup. Elinor, outside the window, saw her. She had started away from the table with Lorraine and Dick, because Lorraine was all impatience to see her hall. But the two had forsaken her in the orchard, to run back for music, and Elinor had come idly on. She stopped on the path to look round at the darkened sky, and then, turning, saw the woman within. It was not so much the act that arrested her as Cassie's face. It was set, as if some mandate had been laid upon her and she moved unwillingly. Elinor opened the door and walked swiftly in.

"Give me the cup," she said.

Cassie stood there over it and looked at her. She did not speak. Her lips tightened, yet the strength had gone out of her. Elinor walked up to the table and lifted the cup. The girl might have prevented her, but she had lost volition.

"Is it tea?" asked Elinor, in a courteous command. "You can pour another cup for him. Let me have this."

"No! no!" cried Cassie strenuously. She stretched out a shaking hand, and would have taken it. But Elinor withdrew it further. Old Sally, hearing voices, had opened the kitchen door, and stood there reading the two faces. She understood them, and spoke harshly, —

"Come! come! come! There's no harm in it."

Elinor went past her to the kitchen and poured the tea into the sink. She set down the cup and went back to the table where Cassie stood, her eyes distended, and one hand on the chair. But old Sally limped after and whispered hoarsely, —

"There's no harm in it. It's toothache drops."

"No, it is n't."

"Well, then, it 's su'thin' else."

"I know. They 're foolish things."

"Not a grain o' harm," avowed Sally, encouraged. "It don't work on the blood as folks thinks. It works on the one that uses it. It kinder gives 'em confidence, an' brightens up their eyes, an' makes 'em think everything 's kingdom come. That 's the way it works."

"Give it to me," counseled Elinor gently, holding out her hand.

But they heard voices at the door, Lorraine and Dick, and Gilbert with them, and Cassie went swiftly into the kitchen. Elinor followed her. The girl opened the back door, and stepped out into the night. Again Elinor was with her. She took a little path Gilbert often tramped to the grove of pines behind the house; and when they were both in their shadow, she turned and spoke, —

"I wish you 'd let me alone!"

"You must give it to me," said Elinor, "or you must throw the stuff away."

Cassie took the bottle from her pocket, pulled out the cork, and let the liquid run into the snow. Then she threw the bottle as far as her strong arm could carry it.

"There!" said she. "Now you can go back."

But Elinor did not move. Cassie spoke sharply.

"Everybody 's safe enough for all me. I 'm going away to-morrow. I shan't come here again."

Elinor had no conception of any difference in persons. Her friends had been peasants, simple men and women who had suffered like herself, like her had sinned, been punished, and obeyed. At that moment Cassie and she seemed amazingly alike, and she hesitated only an instant for words to prove that kinship. When it comes to the higher lands of feeling, there is a singular understanding between creatures who do not speak the same language every day. The priest need not hesitate in conveying the mysteries. He may not explain them, but they are understood.

"It is a foolish thing," she said again. "Love is n't bought that way."

Cassie turned dumbly about, and set her feet into the deeper snow.

"Where are you going?" asked Elinor. But the girl did not answer. Elinor laid hold of her hand and drew it to her bosom where the fur of her cloak was warm.

"Cassie," she said softly yet eagerly, as if she awakened some one who was sleeping, "that 's no way to make people care. Don't you know that, child? And we don't want to make them. It 's enough to care about them."

"Is it?" asked Cassie, in a dull tone. "Well, you go in." But she liked the touch of her hand upon the fur. She felt Elinor's delicacy and luxuriance in this nearness. There was something sweet in it, something that lay softly, like a bloom, upon her jealous pain.

"It 's enough to do things for them," said Elinor, speaking with a rush of words, as she remembered her own starved life across the bitter sea. "I call you lucky, Cassie. You can do things. You can make them comfortable. You can see that things are bright and clean about them, that they eat what they like and find their bed soft at night. Some women have starved for it. Some women would give all the rest of their lives if they could have a year of waiting on him, making his house sweet to him, getting their feet tired taking steps. They would n't ask to be looked at or remembered. Such women would feel rich." Her own breath came swiftly. In another moment she might sob; but she was not thinking of herself, nor her own stress of body. Cassie turned, and was looking at her in the darkness, her own face an interrogation of wonder.

"My Lord!" she breathed. "My Lord!"

"It 's no shame to love a man who does n't love us," said Elinor, in a throbbing haste. "It is something to be proud of, if only we don't ask anything back. We could n't do that, could we? The love of a man is easy to get, I believe — easy to get — what we can persuade them to call love, when we have wakened it in them. But we don't want that. We want the big thing that is as real — as real as the earth, Cassie, as the sky, as the trees."

"All outdoors," returned Cassie mechanically, looking about her, and inclosing the universe in her everyday speech.

"All outdoors. And if we can't have that, there is a kind we can give, — the kind that asks for nothing back. It 's like praying for them all the time, don't you see? It 's like saying to God, 'Remember! Remember! When you remember this earth, remember him.'"

Cassie felt nothing in the world, at the moment, save the glow and charm of her. It was not preaching, unless preaching is something as sweet and intimate as the speech of Saint Francis to the birds. The girl felt strangely beloved, as if something greater than she had included her in the flow of a soft, warm pity.

"You 're cold," said Elinor suddenly. "Come under my cloak."

"No. I 'm going in."

"Of course! they 'll need you. By and by they 'll all be coming over, and you 'll have to make coffee and things."

They had turned toward the house. Cassie spoke with a sad little laugh, that yet, with its thrill of hurt pride, held something wistful.

"Ain't you afraid I 'll drop something in?"

Elinor threw the end of her cloak about the girl's shoulders. "No, you won't," she said. "That was foolish. We don't do such things twice. I 'll leave you here. I don't believe I 'll come in at all."

Cassie stopped. She wanted the world to go on exactly as it had before she troubled it.

"I wish you would," she said.

"I 'll come later. Not now. Good-night."

She went quickly into the orchard path, and Cassie looked after her, and then up at the sky, where there was space. The created world seemed suddenly very great. When she went in, old Sally was setting out plates on the kitchen table.

"He wants bread and cheese and beer at ten," she said, without looking up. "You give them pewter mugs a rub. They 'd ought to been done afore."

XIX

EARTH AND THE MAN

It was a serious evening, in spite of Gilbert Horne's precautions. The great fire burned to a wonder, and the rafters were obscurely lighted; but for some reason Lorraine would not dance. They sat about and talked in a fragmentary way, and went home early. When they left the house, Gilbert was beside Elinor. It was clear and cold, and the orchard lay inky black. He proposed a walk, but nobody assented very eagerly. Then he said in a lower tone to Elinor: —

"Come. They don't want to. Come on, to the five pines."

"No, not to-night."

She had not the heart to take him out of his house while Cassie was undone. So he left them at the door, and went on by himself.

Natalie followed Mannering into the library. He was settling his father in a chair by the fire, and the old man was grumbling.

"You 're never at home now, Brice," he said. "We used to have such long evenings. We read a good deal together, Brice. We never read now."

Mannering was beginning to soothe him with his accustomed homilies, when Natalie appeared at his elbow. She had not taken off her hat, but she stood there, her jacket over one arm, and an outdoor flush lingering in her cheeks. Her eyes had brightened with the thought of what she had to do, and to Mannering she looked determined. He was tired of seeing belligerent women at his elbow, stinging him into flight.

"Cousin Brice," said Natalie, "have you done what I asked you?"

"No," returned Mannering, "I have n't."

"I hate to bother you about it now; but you 're so seldom home early. When can you do it, Brice?"

"Things take time, Natalie, they take time. I can't close up a trust of that sort in a minute."

Her eyes grew large with disappointment.

"But I need the money, Brice," she declared. "I need it."

He spoke with the new firmness he had worn like a protective armor ever since he had assumed it before his wife.

"I shall attend to it at once, Natalie, at once. Just give me time to turn round. Rome was n't built in a day." A platitude gave him a momentary courage. He seemed to stand upon it, intrenched behind the defenses of a lifetime. Then he began to cheer his father into some sort of comfortable assurance, and they went upstairs together. Natalie stood there thoughtfully looking at the fire, when Madam Walsingham came in.

"I want my book," she explained, with an incidental glance at Natalie. "Yes, that 's it. I don't sleep very much now. I don't need it. That 's one of the penalties of age." She came up to the fire, and put an exquisite foot to the blaze. Natalie pushed forward a chair, but Madam Walsingham did not take it. She seemed to be searching the coals for answers to questions that never could be asked.

"It 's a curious thing, growing old," she said, and now she sank into a seat and held her foot again to the flame. Natalie drew up another chair, and curled herself into its hollow. She had a feeling of kinship with this old woman, more binding than the tie of blood; yet it seemed to be a hidden relationship, not to be explored too curiously.

"You are the same," went on Madam Walsingham, musing. "Yet you are not in the least the same. You are a stranger on the earth. There is nothing for old age but loneliness."

"Oh, grannie!"

Madam Walsingham did not heed her at all. She was communing aloud, gathering up the fluttering leaves of daily impressions and plaiting them in her hand.

"Nobody has any particular interest in you," she continued, "except for what you can give them, or what they tickle their vanity in giving you. You die at last from loneliness. It is n't because your joints creak, and your eyes won't see and your ears won't hear. It 's because the young have inherited the earth."

Her dispassionate tone was unbearable, and Natalie in swift impulse put out a hand.

"Grannie," said she, "you must n't. It is n't true. You must n't."

The old woman looked at her with her brilliant smile.

"You think I care?" she asked. "Bless you, no!

There 's nothing I want. There 's nothing any of you could give me. I read my book in peace, and when there 's a red sunset I like to look at it. It 's only when I see women like you and that handsome Kate Mannering champing the bit and pawing up the ground that I get tired. I know what you 're going through, and I know where it will land you. Old age, my dear, old age! That 's the end of it. Hunger and labor and sorrow, and the grave at last!"

Natalie shrank back into the deep chair, and covered her face from the fire. She was afraid of the path before her, and this old woman who had walked it was giving her a double dread.

Madam Walsingham got up, and pushed back her chair. "I am tired of the hunger of women," she said, still as if she had no auditor. "They agonize and dream and agonize again for one thing — to be loved. They dream a dream about love, and they find it and it is never like the dream. And then they go to sleep, and dream the dream all over."

"What do you want us to do?" asked Natalie, in a voice that held a cry.

"I want you to take the world as men take it: see how good it is, work a little, play a little, and keep down hunger." Now she remembered Natalie. She laid her hand on the girl's shoulder, a rare intimacy of touch. Yet it was not a caress; it compelled attention. "I want you to be wise," she said. "We live like children until it is too late. We are at the mercy of our emotions, and we call our emotions sacred. We might as well call a drifting leaf sacred because the wind hurries it. What you feel, my dear, is the awful remnant of strength you were meant to put into bearing children and being patient with them. Put it into other things. Work, play. When you come to my time, don't be burnt out with futile fires." She walked away with a soft rustling of silk, and Natalie cowered lower into the chair. At the door Madam Walsingham turned, and then came back. She spoke fiercely, as if she were compelled.

"And yet there is something better. The incredible thing is always true. *Credo quia impossibile est.* The one way is the way that woman Elinor has found."

"What is the way?"

"It is the way that has given that woman her look, as if she wore a halo. She is starved, like the rest of you, but she feeds on something else. She has submitted to something, and it feeds her."

Now she went upstairs, and Natalie sat dominated by her as by one in authority. The room was still. The fire fell lower. She seemed not to be asleep, and yet she dreamed. Richard came to her in the old swift way of a lover who was glad to come. In the first days of their knowing each other, they had fancied there was a strange communion between them, so that one could summon and the other answer. That had fallen into disuse now; it was like other frayings of enfeebled habit. But to-night she seemed to have summoned him. He knelt beside her and held her cold hand in his, warm with an overplus of life. "Natalie!" she heard him say, over and over, her name in every tone of delighted love. The blood ran warm through her veins where it had beat so sluggishly. She told him many things, yet without words, in a delicious confidence. She had that wonderful feeling after long absence of getting home — that satisfied heart's desire with which we dream, on lonely nights, of the beloved dead. And above all there was warmth, subduing the chill of loneliness. The things she had not mentioned for years were now all told. They were like two new come to paradise. She opened her eyes, and saw Elinor in the other chair. She had put on a stick, and the blazing flame was bright. Elinor looked pale, but her face had a beautiful calm.

"Is it late?" asked Natalie.

"Eleven. I heard a voice and thought it was Katharine. So I came down."

"Did I cry out?"

Elinor smiled with the tenderness of some sweet saint.

"You made little moaning noises, like a child. They were happy, so I did n't wake you."

"Was any one else here?"

"No."

"Then it was a dream," said Natalie. "It was a dream." She gathered herself together, and put a hand to her disordered hair. But though it was a dream, her face was warm and sweet with the firelight and the red of happiness. They rose and went upstairs together, and all that night the mantle of the dream was over her, and she awoke at peace.

That night Gilbert Horne went wandering alone. He pushed into the deep woods and visited old friends there, big trees in familiar clearings and knolls from which he saw the sky. The earth spirit was upon him, the spirit that stood outside his house and made him uneasy with its calling, and sooner or later drew him forth. He was at one with these nights when darkness reigned below and the stars were thick in a blue heaven. His blood ran with the earth, and he let his mind loose in far imaginings. In warmer weather he was used to throwing himself on his back and looking up until he could feel how the earth was racing. To-night he leaned against a tree, and shutting his mind to what was about him, gave way to thought. Space opened before him, countless worlds spinning orderly and true. He was blotted out, so far as being is volition or desire. There were only space and motion and continued time. These were his moments of happiness. He worshiped what was great: it might be the universe, it might be what made it; but his God included the infinite complexity of things and made them simple. His scorn of himself and his own ways of life was not alone humility; he found his happiness only in what comprised him and was forever larger than his thought. Presently he, too, came out of his maze and went homeward with the chrism of it still upon him. But the walls, with their familiar comfort, were no refuge in a night like this, and he turned off at a side path and sought out the house in the woods. There he built himself a fire, and lay down before it wrapped in the blanket of the night. The warmth and sweetness of the place recalled him to the usages of life, and human needs awoke and stung him. Elinor was in his mind. His heart called her. He went back to the dream of his youth, and enfolded it without a thought of making it more than a dream. When he had imagined himself mated, it was always with some soft furred creature in another time, when they two ran down watercourses together and nibbled green leaves in the spring and licked their glossy coats. The wild blood in him made that union possible. He had dreamed of women, but always because they awoke the same swift pulse in him; and he put the thought away. Marriage again terrified the old wild blood that had kept him with his mate in the watercourses. You could not abandon your white wife for seasons, as you could leave your glossy mate, and betake yourself to the wood. He was a savage, in spite of his mild manners; and elemental wooings and swift leavings were the only ones for him. So marriage was not possible. But Elinor! She seemed to be holding a hand upon his fevered pulse, not to still it but to teach it firmer beating. She seemed to know the things he did not, intimate secrets of worship and divinities, and he adored her for it. The universe knew the things he did not, and that was why he, from his little space in it, wondered and was happy. But she seemed, the immortal spirit of her, to be different from the universe as he had known it. So he lay before the fire and thought, not of men and women until morning, as he had sometimes done, but of the woman who seemed to him all spirit, and of whom, since she was a spirit, he was afraid.

XX

AN EQUAL RIGHT

To-night Mannering had come home early, delighting his father, who sang the old song of loneliness without him. They had some confidences of a small nature in the library, the old man telling what he had for his luncheon and the probable effect and Brice listening with a patience that never failed. Presently he advised the captain to go for a walk on the veranda as a hygienic measure, and promised to join him later; and when the old man had pottered out, staff in hand and swathed to the chin, Brice went to the stairs and called Katharine. She came wonderingly, and looked down at him. There had been little intercourse between them of late.

"I want to see you," he repeated.

"I'll be down in a minute."

He went back and established himself by the fire. He was tired. This unusual business of staying in town to escape Katharine had upset his orderly routine. He was of those for whom life can run on forever, so no small obstacle is placed in the way, but who are easily checked and lamed. Bound round by habit, he was a man who, in his soul, thought he might do anything; but when custom was broken, he was shattered too. More than that, the excitement of success after years of a mild commercial puddling tried him to irritability, because he was not quite sure what new thing the business exigency might demand. He was blundering with unfamiliar tools.

Katharine came in, gravely inquiring. There were dark shadows under her eyes. She looked as if she had fallen below the measure of her usual health. Brice, the most scrupulous of men, vowed to the old-fashioned courtesy in which he and his father were of one habit, did not rise to receive her. He looked up from the chair where he had settled, and nodded toward the door.

"Shut it, won't you?" he said, and Katharine obeyed, again wondering. She took the opposite chair and waited. Brice looked over at her with the appealing air of one who asks counsel of a person who may refuse it.

"Katie," said he, "can't you write another book?"

"Another book?"

"Our orders are falling off. 'Hearts Inspired' is n't keeping up to last month's sales."

"You don't seem to have slackened in your advertising."

Everywhere "Hearts Inspired" faced her until she was sick of the name. The newspapers were still big with it, and she had given up going into town because it jumped at her from every corner. It was arrogant advertising, the output of a man who could waste money like water, or the work of a child who plays the game to win or lose the whole.

"I 've spent thousands in it, thousands," he repeated. "But we 've got to do something more. Write another book, Katie. I 'll announce it—'Author of "Hearts Inspired."' It need n't run to any great length — eighty thousand words would do. 'Hearts Inspired' is a long book. A shorter one would go still better. How do you feel about it?"

He looked at her appealingly, in an absolute oblivion that the book had ever come between them. She was a moment silent, gazing at him in a dazed speculation and wondering if he really could forget.

"What kind of a book should you advise?" she asked.

His face cleared with the hope of counsel.

"Another novel," he said eagerly. "On the same lines, exactly the same lines. What do you say to a sequel?"

"A sequel never goes," returned Katharine quietly, still watching him as if she tempted his soul to come forth and be inspected.

Mannering had no idea of concealing his soul. He had very simple motives, and he saw no need of hiding them. Katharine might have known his heart from the beginning, if she had not denied herself by fitting him to invisible standards. Now, he thought, they were in some accord.

"No, a sequel might fall flat," he said reflectively. "But another book on the lines of this. Some dash in it, some go, and as daring as you like. You can do it."

"What can you recommend if I don't do it?"

"There's only one thing. We must disclose the authorship."

"What?"

"An announcement in the papers: 'Katharine Mannering, the wife of the publisher, is said to be the author of "Hearts Inspired."' That brings the reporters out. You would n't mind interviews: they stimulate the public. That 's it, Kate — stimulate! You could tell how you wrote it. You could talk to women's clubs. But a new book — that 's the thing!"

Horror took hold on her; this spectre of a public avowal she had never faced before. So far, she had borne the stigma of the thing because of the secrecy surrounding it. That Gilbert Horne should know it, that he should even see in perpetuity of print the book he had condemned, was scorching to her. She had wondered whether he suspected how the deed was done, or if he thought her base enough to do it. But she could not tell him. The bond forbade, and she hated it anew because it smirched her. And now it was not a man, but all men who must know.

"Brice," said she, "you must not tell anybody I wrote that book."

"Oh, very well, very well! But I 've got to do something. Will you write another?"

"I might. I don't know. But if I wrote another it would be of a different kind, a decent story over my own name. I will not go through life with this horrible thing tacked to my breast like a disgrace. I will not." The indignation he so hated came upon her, and she grew to tragic stature.

"Now, now, Katie!" he said irritably, "don't get so mad. I wish to heaven you would n't get so mad."

Her mind, thrown back upon itself, suffocated under its inability to force an understanding on him. It was like screaming to deaf ears, and then, when her voice was torn to tatters, finding she must scream again.

"You don't understand, Brice," she insisted, "you don't understand. When you published that book, you did me a great wrong. I did wrong in writing it. I will have nothing whatever to do with it now. You brought my punishment upon me by printing it. But that is penalty enough."

It seemed foolish indeed to him, this talk of abstract punishments when tangible issues were at stake. To his mind she was absolutely lacking in a comprehension of bare fact. Things were in a bad way for him, and a little acquiescence on her part might help him through. He dared the truth.

"You 've got to see things as they are. Natalie 's hounding me to settle up her estate. She wants her money. She says she 's got to have it."

"It 's her money. Give it to her."

"Good Lord, Kate! that money has gone into the firm."

"What?"

He lost patience with her.

"How did you think I had advertised 'Hearts Inspired' as I have? Did you suppose they gave me space?"

"Then you have muddled it away?"

"Muddled it away! I am getting it back on the book."

"Then what you get on the book belongs to Natalie."

That formula enraged him. Here was an abstruse calculation reduced to a simple arithmetic that left him nowhere.

"It does n't belong to Natalie," he said. "It belongs to me. I borrowed it."

"How did you borrow it?"

"I borrowed it. I was her trustee."

"Did you borrow it by the expedient you used to get my signature?"

He did not answer that; but after a moment he spoke with dignity.

"It has been necessary, from time to time, for Natalie to transfer securities to me. She has always done it willingly. She has had the utmost confidence in me. I have never betrayed her confidence."

"Then you will give her back her money, Brice, — whatever you have made out of that book."

"Natalie will be paid everything ultimately," he said, with the dignity of the man who proposes to pay nothing at the time.

"Now, now, Brice! She wants it now. And get it out of your hands. It 's stolen money. Pay her now."

"Kate, you talk like a fool. Do you think my business is like selling a yard of tape, getting twenty-five cents for it, and finding the twenty-five cents in the drawer at night? I can pay her, — I shall, in six months or so. I can't put my hand in my trousers pocket and bring out the money now."

She leaned her head on her hand, and looked out of the window with glittering eyes.

"It 's all very unfortunate. If I could publish one or two more books on the strength of this, I could arrange the whole thing without feeling it; but as it is, it 's not to be done. Natalie must wait."

"Natalie must wait! It 's her money, and she wants it, and she must wait!"

"Then, confound it, if she 's got to be paid, why can't you do the only thing to bring it about? Write another book, and there you are."

She rose from her chair and stood regarding him.

"I shan't write another book, Brice," she said evenly, but as if she bade him take heed. "I shan't call myself your wife, and I shan't live in this house after a few weeks more."

"Oh, for God's sake, don't go back to that!" he cried, beyond his slight endurance. "You have been threatening to leave me for the last fifteen years. When we get out of this hole, we'll see about it; but it's no time now."

"I ought to have done it fifteen years ago. I was a coward and a fool. I had a right to my liberty. I had a right to live my life in the way I thought best. These things prove it to me."

Brice got up from his chair, and approached her. He was not irritated now. He looked manly even to her, in his sincerity.

"See here, Kate," he said, "did it ever occur to you I had a right to live my life in the way I wanted to? If you had a right to, had n't I? Say now, had n't I?"

She answered quickly, —

"You had! you had! I've always been sorry for you, because you were tied to me, as I was tied to you."

"You need n't have been sorry. I did n't want to get away. But some things I did want, and as you say, if I want 'em I've a right to 'em. I want to make money. I want the things it will bring me. I want to take father abroad before he's too old. If you've got a right to lead your life the way you please, I've got a right to lead mine."

She looked upon him in an understanding so sudden that it gave her pain.

"But, Brice," she said, "you 've done the things men can't do. You 've done things in the dark. You 've taken Natalie's money."

"I guess we all do things in the dark more or less, when we 're looking out for number one." He spoke with a new ease of confidence. "You want to get away from me. You say you have a right to. I don't want to get away from you, but I want some other things. We 're both fighting for what we want."

In all their years together he had never approached as near to any consideration of their common cause. Whenever she had touched upon vital issues he had refused to talk, and so dumbly that she sometimes wondered whether he even heard her. But his manner changed at once into the old triteness.

"You start another book, Katie," he said. "It 'll be all right if you 'll start another book."

She turned toward the door, her muscles weak under her.

"Brice," she said, "Natalie must be paid."

"Natalie 's going to be paid," he replied cheerfully. "But you write that book!"

Then Katharine went upstairs, and she heard the door clang after him as he hurried out to join his father.

Katharine walked into her own room. Elinor was there on the couch under the window, a book in her hand. She looked up and then came to her feet, to go away.

"No," said Katharine, aware of her, but not gathering herself yet to speak. "Sit down, Nell. I want you." She took a chair by the fire, and resting her chin on her hand, sat there looking into the coals. At last she spoke, throwing off the perplexity that had held her.

"Nell, I have never understood it at all."

"What?"

"I have never understood anything between Brice and me. I thought we were like strangers living together, and yet I believe I have been moulding him all this time. I have made him do things he never would have done."

"I always knew you had a great influence over him. He refers things to you. He wants to please you."

"He does n't want to please me; he wants to vindicate himself. I have despised him all my life. He knows it. I have adored anything that was strong and big and valiant. So all the time he tries in his way to be valiant — to justify himself. But he works like a mole in the dark, because that 's his way, too."

"I don't understand, Kate."

"I can't tell you any plainer. But, don't you see, I have preached the gospel of the individual's right to liberty? He may not believe in me, but I dominate him by sheer animal force. So he, too, believes the doctrine of individuality; but to him it does n't mean the things we all ought to want: it means the things he wants. And why should n't it? Poor Brice!"

Elinor was too far outside to answer, and Katharine went on in the same musing tone.

"He said we all do things in the dark. Well, don't we? When our blood mounts, and we want our way, would our desires bear the light? When I look at a good clean man, stronger than I, and say to myself, 'Would to God, God had given me to him instead of Brice!' do my thoughts bear the light any more than Brice's when he stretches out his hands to take what he can't get?" She spoke with such passion that Elinor longed to answer her availingly; but all possible words seemed platitudes. Katharine struck her knee with her clenched fist. "Everything in life, everything," she said, "seems to prove that we must walk in the way men have marked out for us. But it is not right, Nell. Is it right?"

"Is what right?"

"Is it right for me to die of starvation and madness and despair living up to a farcical bond with a man like Brice?"

"Kate, on my soul and honor I don't know. I only know it is right not to think of ourselves."

"What shall we think of? The creature we are tied to? I have hurt him by living with him, as much as he has hurt me."

"We must think of what is higher than ourselves."

"Shall no wife ever leave the man she married?"

"Yes, Kate, yes! There are reasons."

"Are the reasons that affect society always to outweigh the reasons that crush the soul? If Brice were a madman, they 'd let me leave him. Shall I stay, when I am going to grow into a madwoman by staying?"

"Kate, you blind me; you bewilder me."

"And the thing is doubly horrible to me when I see how it has affected Brice. I thought he was more or less contented, pottering about his little paths. Let him alone, and he would have been blameless; but I have bent and urged and twisted him until he is as much a victim to this awful life as I have been. Don't you see, Elinor? It 's not only the one creature who is unhappy, not one only who wants to get away. They act and react on each other. Yet what are we to do? I say the individual shall be free. I say it until another man believes it and he takes the freedom he likes best. What shall we do?"

"It is simpler to do the things that everybody must do. If we have made a promise, we must keep it."

"If it is an unrighteous one? I won't, Nell, I won't. You can't make me. I may not have a right to freedom, but I will be free."

"You shall be free," flashed Elinor, the woman in her mounting. "You shall go away by yourself. Or you shall go with me, and I won't look at you or speak to you twice a day."

Yet as she spoke, something rose before her like a vision: the outline of a cross in a great sky. She could not find the way: only life seemed of necessity a bondage, not to any man or congregation of men, but to the ideal as suffering creatures have decreed it. To repudiate a promise gave her a hurt, as if one should tear down a little from a structure built up, inch on inch, by patient creatures who dragged thither with bleeding feet to bring their tribute. Yet here was the concrete issue, and she found no words. The paradox had blinded her.

"Where are the big deeds, if nobody dares to do them?" Kate was saying. "The world goes on, and one day somebody rebels. You call him a liberator."

"Yes, if he dies for something not himself."

"If I free myself, it may be easier for other women, other men. I 'm not doing it for that, Nell. No, I 'm not. I 'm doing it because there 's something suffocating in me. It wants to breathe."

Again Elinor fell into thought, and when Katharine spoke she voiced that inner colloquy.

"Must I live with him, Nell? Must I?"

"I think not," said Elinor. "I think you must go away."

Hot blood rose in Katharine, and turned her reckless.

"I want my life," she cried. "All these years, these days and nights and springs and summers, and the earth budding under me, and I have n't had my life. What if God said to me, 'You fool! I gave you life and you would n't take it. Somebody tied a piece of twine round your wrists and round your ankles, and you would n't snap it.' Nell, this bond with Brice, — why, it 's like bamboozling donkeys as they do sometimes. They loop one bridle round the next donkey's ear. He 's tied, and so he stands."

"It is not a bond with Brice. It 's a bond with all mankind."

"Then am I to stay? Will it do mankind any good to have me go mad here, driving Brice mad, too?"

"Kate, you will go, you are going! But you must n't ask me questions. I can't answer them."

Katharine got up, and one of her mercurial changes came upon her. She put clever fingers to her hair, and settled it in its beautiful disorder.

"Nell," said she, "I am going to write a book."

"Good luck to it!"

"It 's going to show the ruin of a husband through the incendiary preaching of a virtuous wife. I shall leave it in Brice's way, and he will publish it."

XXI

A GIFT REFUSED

THE days were nearly all white ones, with new fallen snow blocking the roads or a glittering crust spread like a web of glass upon the hills. There had not for many years been such a rigorous winter. Something so stimulating was in the air that they felt it at Edgcombe Hill, and were moved by it, each after his own nature. Only upon Natalie it lay cold like an omen of death. The snow seemed to be holding down the earth and chilling it, as silence held her and despair had stopped her blood. She thought without hope of the breaking of bonds in the spring. It was like the knowledge that life will come to some but not to us, as it befalls when pain has dulled us, so that we see the earth delivered over into other hands. She thought of Dick day and night as she had for years, only now she had the present task of freeing him from Lorraine. All the hurts of common jealousy had forsaken her. There was not enough power in her blood to carry that elemental pang. But she knew her sister, with a cold certainty born out of the past. If Dick were to court her now, and fit the fondness of maturity to old passion, she knew Lorraine would never take that offering. Worse, she would never leave it; but Dick would go wandering after her, one of her purveyors of pleasure, rewarded by her sweet-natured friendliness and the chance to do more service. And Dick could not afford it. Neither as a matter of feeling nor of years could he afford it. Natalie saw him now building up some solid interest, it might be books or it might be farming; but he must not drift. The time for wandering was over. He must clench with life and conquer, or let it throw him. She had stood aside from any emotional onslaught, but now that resolution failed, and she set her will upon him. Night after night, when he and Lorraine were at the piano, or laughing in the cold air as they paced up and down, she sat in her chamber with locked hands and called him to her. But he never came. He was good to her. Dick was always that; yet he never saw her when Lorraine was by. Night after night she would look at her drawn face in the glass, and think how unlovely it was compared with features that were made to show content. Still, she told herself again, she had seen those eyes laugh. She had caught curving delight upon the mouth. If earth had fed her with some milk of faithfulness, she would have been as beautiful as Lorraine. Once when revolt was strong upon her, she put on her hat and jacket and ran downstairs.

"Dick," she said, from the hall, "come here a minute."

He came from a talk with Mannering about the book. Natalie was breathless, but she spoke calmly as she always did to him, because she hated her emotions. She knew they had no beauty in them.

"I want a little run. Get your hat, quick. Come with me."

She read his eyes.

"No," said Natalie. "No! Don't call them. Come alone. I won't take you far." She opened the door and hurried out; he followed her. She ran down into the road, excited by good fortune, and afraid yet of Lorraine's voice behind her in the dark. Out under the sky, she breathed again. Dick took her hand and drew it within his arm.

"Which way?" he asked.

"Any way. Yes, that." They followed the path to the house in the woods. It was natural to do that, having no purpose. Natalie could not speak on the way. She hurried him, and Dick, wondering at her, tried to talk a little, and then whistled. When they reached the knoll, he asked her, —

"Going in?"

"Yes," said Natalie. It seemed to her she might have more breath if she rested. Dick pushed open the door. It was no surprise to find a dying fire. "Old Gil!" said he, and threw on wood. But afterwards when he struck a match, she took it from his hand and dropped it into the fire. "No," she said, "don't get a light. I can't talk in the light."

"Is anything the matter, Natalie?" he asked, in his kindly tone. It was solicitous; her jealous heart told her it was not loving.

"No, nothing is the matter. Only, Dick, I want you to take my money."

"Your money, child? What for?"

She hurried on, speaking with calmness, though that inner anguish twisted her poor lips.

"It is n't much, but I want you to go into business with it. I want you to buy out Fiske and Bailey."

"Dear child, I can't do that." He was deeply moved. Natalie was always doing things for him in a shy way, and he was always warding them off. She was inviting the world to rob her at every turn. He protected her from the consequences of her own warm-heartedness.

"I knew you'd say so! I knew it! Why can't you, Dick? There's no reason why you can't."

"There's every reason, Natalie." He spoke gravely, but his eyes were wet.

"What reason?"

"If I want to buy out Fiske and Bailey, I must borrow, if I've got the nerve, and do it as men do. I can't take a woman's money."

She brought up her reserves of subterfuge.

"You see, Dick," she said, clasping her hands together on her lap, "I want to be in it, too. I want to go into business."

"You, Natalie? Gammon! You don't know a ledger from a Keats."

"I want to put my money into something." She was groping after the convincing phrase. "You and I could be partners. I furnish the money, you the brains. I don't appear in it at all. I should be very cocky over it."

"Yes, I see, dear," said Dick gravely. He took her hand and kissed it. "You're a good child, Natalie."

"Do it for me, Dick!"

"No, I can't do it. But you're a good child."

"Well," concluded Natalie, in a dull acquiescence, folding her hands again, "then it's of no use. We can go home now."

But Dick had seated himself, and clasped his hands above his head.

"One minute," he petitioned. "Is anything the matter with Lorraine? Does anything bother her?"

"I don't know." She had put on the careful restraint that served her when he talked about Lorraine.

"Lorraine is different. She is abstracted. She is thinking about things she does n't tell. Lorraine can't be unhappy."

"Why?"

"Oh, she can't be! It is n't in her. That 's why she is so fascinating. She 's irresponsible. She 's consistent in it. She 's complete."

Natalie shrank from asking too much, yet she forced her dry lips to say, —

"Do you understand her better than you did?"

"Than I did when?"

"Years ago, when she was a girl."

He laughed unaffectedly. It betrayed some past communion with himself.

"I understand her very well," he said. "She 's a thing of beauty and a joy forever."

Natalie rose.

"Now we 'll go," she said, with the calm that fits a subject done and over. "Smash the fire a little. There, that 's right."

They walked home very fast, and Natalie gained a color from the wind. Her cheeks were pink with it, and her lips parted with the need of breath. Dick took her jacket and hung it up, smiling at her as if he thanked her over again for what she offered him. She ran upstairs, and in a moment she heard the piano, and knew Lorraine was dancing. His voice sounded in her ears above the music,—"a thing of beauty and a joy forever."

Natalie had no more time for brooding. It seemed to her that she must act in haste, and she found out Mannering where he sat in the library, alone this time, for the captain, mysteriously tired, had gone to bed. Mannering looked up, and drew his brows together with a nervous frown. Now he was haunted by two women instead of one. Natalie closed the door behind her, and began without preamble. She knew she had clever things to divulge, such as must convince him.

"Cousin Brice," she said, "I want to talk to you, in confidence."

"By all means," returned Brice, laying down his paper. "In confidence, of course! Safe as a church, Natalie, safe as a church!"

Natalie had conceived some new respect for him, of late, because of "Hearts Inspired." He had made it the talk of many towns. She might, she thought, have underrated cousin Brice.

"I am going to tell you what I wanted money for."

"Ah!"

"I am tired of doing nothing," said Natalie, piling up her little cardhouse as she had planned to build it before Dick. "I want some interest in life. I shall go into business."

Brice frowned his discouragement. Here, thought he, was another woman gone mad over nothing. No axiom came to hand, and he frowned the deeper in a consequential protest.

"I made Richard a business proposition," said Natalie, her voice shaking a little. But she controlled it, and went on. "I asked him to let me buy out Fiske and Bailey — all this is in confidence, cousin Brice — and to let me have a share of the business. A silent partner — is that what you call it? He is not willing."

"Really?" said Brice, in a cordiality that was half relief. "So that 's off, and you don't want any different arrangement after all! You 're quite right, Natalie. Your money is far safer as it is. Good securities, gilt-edged! You risk nothing."

She ignored him, perhaps from habit. It had become so much the family custom to leave out Brice that it was difficult now to act upon any other ground.

"So I want to propose something else," she said. "It must be between you and me. Why not buy out Fiske and Bailey, and combine their trade with yours?"

Mannering looked at her with mouth half open. Natalie seemed to be bent on sowing pearls. She threw them broadcast. If one man would not pick them up, she sought another.

"I mean," said she, "that you and Dick might go into partnership. I would furnish the money he on his side ought to put in. The proposal to him must come from you. I must be left out of it altogether. I suppose I could be paid interest on my money. That would be enough for me to live on."

Mannering still stared vacuously.

"Cousin Brice," said Natalie, as if she shook him, "cousin Brice, don't you understand me?"

"You want me to buy out Fiske and Bailey," he repeated, as if it were a lesson. "You want me to take Dick into partnership."

Natalie leaned toward him, all hot eagerness.

"I want you two together to build up a big business. Dick can do great things. He can manage men. He 's hand in glove with the press. You 've said so. I heard you telling cousin Katharine so the other night. You said he had been worth thousands in pushing 'Hearts Inspired.'"

Mannering nodded.

"He 's got some go," he owned, with tardy appreciation. For the moment, it seemed to him, she was forgetting his own share in "Hearts Inspired."

"You could do splendid things with a bigger business," said Natalie, bent, in general terms, on pouring her spirit into his. She was chiefly concerned in expressing herself clearly. Intensity of purpose had to serve her in the place of skill. "You would have all the Fiske and Bailey books. Dick says they did some clever things; some foolish ones, too. He knows their mistakes. He would n't repeat them. Cousin Brice, don't you see what I mean?"

"I see what you mean," said Mannering slowly.

He needed to think it over. For his own part, he cared very little about extending his connection. What he really wished, as he had honestly told Katharine, was to go abroad with his father. But Natalie, first with her disconcerting demand for her own and then this new proposal, seemed to make something complex out of a simple situation. Mannering, in his business ventures, always wanted a margin for carelessness. He needed enough money to be able to say "Never mind!" when slovenly bookkeeping landed him in error. The methods of men who knew where ten cents might be lurking were as mysterious to him as the remarkable exactitude of the stars in their courses, or nature's precision in numbering the petals of her flowers. He would have liked, when the moment came for shutting up shop and taking his father away, to draw out the solid sum they were likely to require, and to leave loose ends flying all abroad. Business would have served its turn. And this slackness of detail existed in him, by some paradox, side by side with a routine methodical enough to have roused his wife to frenzy.

"Cousin Brice," said Natalie again, "don't you understand me?"

"Yes, yes," said he, rousing himself. "You want me to negotiate with Fiske and Bailey."

"I want you to do that and do it now."

"You want it kept from Dick."

"Yes, until it is concluded. Then propose the partnership. If he 's away, telegraph him."

"Very well, Natalie, very well! I dare say it can be managed."

"It must be managed," she said hotly. "We can talk about details later. And don't bring me into it, at all. I 'm not to appear. You promise that."

"Very well, Natalie, very well!" For a moment he did wonder confusedly about her motives; but that only complicated the situation, and he gave it up.

XXII

LEVINSKI

LORRAINE was, as Richard had seen, uneasy. Her spirits did not fail her, but they were subject to mercurial change. She had vitality to waste. It hurried her here and there: she seemed to be running away from thought. No trouble ever moved her face, and she took as childlike an interest in life; but Natalie, too, saw that her mind was elsewhere. One day, Madam Walsingham, who apparently noted nothing, said to Natalie, as they sat together in the old lady's room, taking a cup of tea, —

"We shall be going soon."

"I don't want you to go," said Natalie. There was emphasis in the phrase, but clearly it did not include Lorraine.

"She is beginning to miss that brute, Levinski," said Madam Walsingham, pouring herself a second cup.

"Lorraine?"

"Yes. She misses him. He is the only one she ever found stronger than herself in the ways she understands. She 'll end by marrying him."

Natalie looked up, with a face suddenly ablaze.

"Marry him," she repeated, in a wondering dullness. "Levinski!"

"Yes. When he gets ready to ask her. I believe his brother has got to die first. But she 'll marry him."

No way of sudden relief had occurred to Natalie, and her first thought flew to Dick. Would this unsettle his life again? Immediately she returned to her maternal broodings over him and reflected that it was late now for him to be wrecked. His tempests of passion ought to be over. He must work. Madam Walsingham set down her cup, and pushed her chair back from the table. She was comforted by her tea, and the serenity of the house enveloped her delightfully.

"Levinski," she began, with the air of unfolding an interesting topic, "is pure brute. He 's not bad, he 's not cruel nor treacherous — he 's simply a brute. Nor dirty. He 's clean enough, like the animals, but he never troubled his head in his life about what we call moral distinctions. He never will. He fascinates Lorraine." Natalie looked at her grandmother, hungry-eyed, and besought her by her silence to go on. "Lorraine simply wants what she wants," said Madam Walsingham. "She never sees a reason for not having it. And Levinski wants what he wants; only he wants it a million times more than Lorraine ever could, because he 's got more brain and blood and brawn. She feels that. He 's her master, and she knows it."

"Will she be unhappy?" Natalie at that moment felt her first compunction for Lorraine. She had never thought the girl could suffer, or that life would have the heart to trouble one so slight. Now Lorraine seemed human, like the rest, and open to the chances of mortality.

"Bless you, no! He won't make her suffer. He 's the stronger. So he 'll always make her do what he wants, and he 'll like her very much. She won't suffer. If she did, she 'd get up and go away. Don't fret yourself about that."

"If she should marry him, grannie, you would n't want to be with them. Would n't you come to us?" Natalie spoke timidly. When any personal question was implied, she was afraid of the old lady. Madam Walsingham was accustomed to that reserve. She lured on her few favorites through a guileless intimacy of speech; but if one infringed upon her borders, she seemed to go into the next county. There were always, in her territory, large spaces for withdrawal. But this time she stayed on the spot, meeting the advance quite cordially.

"I shan't mind him," she replied. "He admires me. He thinks I am his superior. So he rules Lorraine and I rule him. No, I shall rather like to trail round after them on their wild goose chases."

That night Lorraine disclosed the point whither her thoughts had tended. She came to Madam Walsingham smiling in the fashion that, as the old lady knew, meant a coming or a present triumph.

"Well," said Madam Walsingham, "what is it?"

"What 's what, grannie?" Lorraine sat down on the floor and put her arms about her grandmother's knees. She looked up over them, her face a garden where the loves and graces were all frolicking. Natalie glanced at her across the room and felt old. Yet Lorraine was older than she; but because she loved the earth only and not the unknown planets, the earth was good to her.

"Up with you," said Madam Walsingham, "and tell us how you 've got your way. What have you triumphed over? Who 's been slaving for you? You need n't pose before me. I saw you when you were an hour old, and a puckery thing you were. I know your arts by heart. If I were fifty years to the good, I could play them off myself."

Lorraine did not get up. Instead, she put her face down upon the old lady's knee, and laughed silently. Abuse made a part of her triumph. But Madam Walsingham took up her book from the table at her side, and began reading it.

"Grannie," said Lorraine softly, "how soon could you be ready to go?"

"Go where?" asked Madam Walsingham, without looking off her page.

"To Canada. My dates are made. We begin in Toronto."

"We?"

"Dick and I."

"How have you got engagements?"

"We have n't. We 've hired halls. We 've advertised. I 've printed my letter from the prince. It cost outrageously."

Madam Walsingham closed her book and laid it aside again.

"When have you decided to go?" she asked dryly.

"Day after to-morrow," said Lorraine, in her softest tone.

"What train?"

"We leave here at eight forty-three. Dick, is it eight forty-three?"

He had come into the room, and stood near Natalie, looking down at her and wondering why she was so pale.

"Eight forty-three," he said, recalling himself, and turning to Lorraine. He was perceptibly older, in this one week. His face had fallen into lines that marred the look of youth.

"So she has persuaded you into her fool's errand?" said Madam Walsingham cheerfully, to him.

"Fool's errand!" repeated Lorraine. "Don't I dance divinely, grannie?"

"You dance divinely," said the old lady, and got up to leave the room. "I'll go and look over my petticoats, and pack to-morrow."

The three were left alone, and Natalie sat looking at Lorraine with speculation in her glance. It occurred to her for the first time that there must be something hideous in this fact that two sisters had no natural affection for each other. She wondered, as she had sometimes of late, what people would say if she followed the mad instincts that beset her. What if she began with her engagement to Dick, and told him that since the first two years, it had been a martyrdom, borne only because she adored him? What if she told Lorraine, "I am not able to keep from hating you"? And then she said aloud, without premeditation, "Perhaps it is n't hatred."

"What is it, Natalie?" asked Lorraine. She had put her arms on Madam Walsingham's chair when the old lady left it, and leaned there yawning. She opened her mouth in a frank abandonment; and because she had beauty and great simplicity she looked delightful in the doing. Dick had heard the words, and turned upon Natalie, startled.

But confused by her musings, she answered hastily, "I don't know."

Lorraine came to her feet, and, finding a chair, said affectionately, "Dear Natalie!"

The endearment was a pin-prick none the less keen because it came every day and many times a day. From some impulse she could not herself define, Natalie responded, "What is Levinski like?"

Lorraine started, all over her body.

"Levinski?" she trembled. "Levinski?"

Dick turned on his heel, and left the room. In a moment Natalie heard him across the hall, laughing with Mannering. It sounded unconcerned, but she made no doubt that jealousy had sent him away at mention of Levinski's name. Lorraine repeated it again, with not much more assurance.

"What do you know about Levinski?" she demanded.

"I asked what he was like," said Natalie. "I don't know why I asked."

Lorraine pulled at the long chain about her neck, and tugged a locket from her bosom. She opened it, with a quick glance toward the door, and turned the face toward Natalie.

"That 's Levinski," she said, in a voice where pride and bravado mingled. It was a dark face, full of a rude strength and power. In the other side of the locket was a curl of coarse black hair. Lorraine snapped the locket, and put it back in its warm resting place. "That 's Levinski," she repeated, in a tone that was now all pride. "What do you think of him?"

"Is he in New York?" pursued Natalie, ignoring the question. What she might have thought of him unaided, she did not know. Now Madam Walsingham's sketch of him was fulfilled; the swarthy face confirmed it.

"He is playing there," said Lorraine. A brief shade passed over her. "He was to play for me, but he has the chance to give some chamber concerts in New York. That 's better. That 's what he ought to do. I must prove myself. I must get some little shade of reputation. Then he will be glad to play for me." There was a self-forgetful yearning in her tone. She ceased for the moment to be the Lorraine who called out emotion and then looked on it, clear-eyed and even mirthful.

Natalie was moved and eager.

"Do you like him, Lorraine?" she asked irrepressibly. Suddenly there seemed the kinship of warm feeling between them, and she felt the glow of it. But Lorraine laughed lightly, prettily.

"Of course I like him," she said. "Enormously!"

"You never say 'Dear Levinski!'"

"Don't I? Then I will now. 'Dear Levinski!'" But the words were a caress.

They sat in silence for a moment, Natalie's mind running on a new track. Suddenly she spoke again, now with an imperative questioning.

"How long is it going to take you to build up reputation enough to satisfy him?"

"Bless you, child, I don't know." Lorraine was her well-poised, normal self again. She played with her chain and regarded her pretty foot lovingly.

"Why don't you go to New York and dance? Then he might play for you."

A spark came into Lorraine's eyes, but she spoke coolly.

"He will find me where I am," she said. "I shall not go to him."

Gilbert Horne came in, reddened from the wind, and gave Natalie a bundle of letters from the mail. She looked them over, and passed one to Lorraine. Then she went into the next room in quest of Mannering, and Gilbert followed her. He looked about him discontentedly.

"Where is Miss Thayer?" he asked Natalie.

"Upstairs. I think she 'll be down presently with cousin Kate."

He took off his coat at that, and settled himself where Mannering and Dick were plunged in further plans for "Hearts Inspired." Natalie went back to the living room. Lorraine was sitting where she left her, a letter open in her hand. A new look was on her face. It was stiffened into resistance of unwelcome news, and pallor had succeeded to its lovely rose. She struck the sheet dramatically with one palm.

"He has gone," she said, in a voice unmindful of its intonations. "He sailed to-day."

"He?"

"Levinski. He is summoned. He has gone home."

"Will he come back?"

Lorraine seemed to dilate with some emotion. It looked like pride.

"He will come back," she said, in a muffled voice. "I shall not follow him." She walked across the room and back again. "There is an elder brother," she added in a grudging haste, as if the explanation were due, although she had no heart to give it. "He is ill. He has been ill for a long time. He wants Levinski to marry in his own country. He has summoned him. Bela has gone back." Now there was softness in her voice, and her face had taken on its youthful calm. Pride was there, and confidence. Natalie wondered afterwards whether this were belief in herself or in the man who had been summoned home. Lorraine turned upon her in a passion Natalie had never suspected under that gay demeanor. "Don't you see," she said, "I must n't fail? I must make him proud of me. When he comes back, he must find me adored by every city in this country, my name on every lip. I must fight it out this winter here, in New York, everywhere. I must dance."

"Who will help you?" Natalie asked the question with a quick forecast of the answer.

"Who will help me?"

"Who will play for you until Levinski comes?"

"Play for me? Dick. Why, Dick!"

"All this winter, all the spring, all next year, if you must? Is that what you mean?"

Lorraine smiled at her. She looked invincible.

"I shan't stop fighting," said she.

"Does Dick know about Levinski?"

"What about him?"

"Does he know he is to carry out this move, and then retire in favor of Levinski?"

Lorraine laughed in pure mirthfulness that betrayed no undercurrent.

"How you do put things, Natalie," she said.

"You never cared for him, Lorraine, never!" returned Natalie, in a strange bitterness of jealousy for the man she loved. She would have had the woman love him and yet not love him. She longed to see them separated; but Lorraine dealt her pride a deadly blow in using him so lightly.

"Cared?" said Lorraine with sweet, wide eyes. "For whom?" But Natalie was ashamed, and would not answer. Lorraine knew, and answered for her. "Dear old Dick! There 's nobody like Dick."

She began singing a little French song about love denied, and sauntered into the next room with it on her lips. Hers was a speaking voice, not a singing one, but she put dramatic vigor into it, and made it thrilling. Dick, still over computations with Mannering, joined her in an absent undertone, and Natalie heard the two voices helping each other and harmonizing. Then Lorraine, still singing, called him softly, and he went to the piano, Gilbert slowly following. Natalie waited until the dance music had begun, and then stole in to Mannering.

"Cousin Brice," she said, in a low tone, "what have you done?"

Mannering gathered up his papers from the table and spoke cheerfully, with the air of a superior to one who has small right to question him.

"Things are going swimmingly, Natalie, swimmingly."

"Have you talked to him — Richard? Have you made him the offer?"

"Not yet. I 'm fixing Fiske and Bailey."

"What do they say?"

In her impatience it seemed to her as if buying out a business were as simple as bargaining over a counter.

"Now, now, Natalie," said Brice reproachfully, "have n't I reminded you Rome was n't built in a day?"

"Dick is going away day after to-morrow."

"So much the better. I can take my own course. Then we can spring it on him."

"He may be gone for months."

"We will wire him."

Natalie came and leaned her hand on the table beside him. Gilbert Horne looked at her, and wondered what she could be saying to give her face that tragic force.

"Cousin Brice," she said, "you must not delay. You must act. I tell you we must act!"

XXIII

THE GHOST OF A BRIDE

THAT night Dick went away early, because he had affairs in town before his coming journey. He looked preoccupied, and the smile came but briefly to his face when Lorraine bade him remember that they were on the road to fame. He walked over to Natalie where she sat by Captain Mannering, pretending to listen while he talked, and hearing nothing. Dick stood a moment before her, looking down at her and pulling on his glove with an absent air. He was regarding her seriously, kindly, and Natalie brought herself to meet his eyes. She was afraid of the betrayal in her own, but a moment calmed her. He found nothing there.

"I shall see you again," he said abruptly.

"To-morrow?"

"Some time to-morrow. Not very early. I shall have a lot to do."

She nodded in her old way, but she did not move. He turned and left her. In the hall, with his hand on the door, he waited, tempted to call her out to him; but the moment passed, and he went away. There was nothing to say to her. He knew he should see her to-morrow, and meantime Natalie would understand. That was the certainty on which their bond was built.

The next day there was great haste in the house.

Natalie worked hard packing for Madam Walsingham and running about with an unwonted eagerness when Lorraine wanted help. She had to occupy the day; it was no longer possible to eat up time in idleness. Lorraine went buoyantly about her preparations. Her face was untouched by the sadness prophesied by yesterday, or the premonition that life would ever be different from what it had been. When Madam Walsingham and Natalie had folded the last garment and laid it in its tray, Lorraine's voice from the next room was rising in a martial song. Madam Walsingham touched Natalie on the arm, and motioned her to silence. The old lady had a curious smile upon her face.

"Listen!" she said, "Levinski has gone to Europe. He may never come back. But listen to her!"

Natalie sat down on a stool in weariness, and Madam Walsingham moved about the room picking up trifles and putting them into discreet and clever little boxes where they were wont to travel. She looked pleasantly absorbed, but the smile lingered on her lips, and Natalie knew she was still thinking of Lorraine. Natalie was too deadened to the impressions of the moment to answer her.

"Grannie," she said, "shall you come back?"

The old lady gave one comprehensive glance about the room, and, satisfied that her work was over, returned to the window, and sat down. She took a fan from the table and held it between her and the light. The lace fell away from her wrist and showed how thin it was. The evening light had been kinder to her, and Natalie suddenly realized that she was very old.

"No," said Madam Walsingham, "I shan't come back. I really can't live very long. It is n't in nature. And I have an impression that I shall die abroad."

"I wish you would come back."

The old lady looked at her in a kindly searching, and again she pointed toward the other room.

"Listen," she said. "Levinski is farther from her every minute — and listen to her."

Natalie could not answer. There was nothing to be said about these everyday affairs, because nothing really mattered. She did wish Madam Walsingham to stay, yet she did not care so very much. There was no energy to spend on anything touching her desires alone. The greatest good that now could come to her, she had no strength to take. She felt herself fading out of the scheme of things, sinking into some void of nature, leaving these robuster combatants to fight out the game alone. Madam Walsingham was watching her, while Natalie looked into vacancy and thought.

"You are not so strong as I was," said the old lady. "I don't know how you will come out of it."

Natalie roused herself.

"Come out of what?" she asked.

"You 've given me more trouble than I 've had for thirty years," said Madam Walsingham.

Natalie shook aside her dream.

"Trouble, grannie? Have I given you trouble?"

"You are exactly like what I was at your age. It is like seeing a picture of myself. I was like you, child, only I was stronger. No, I shan't come back here. I can't go through it all again with you."

"You will be happier with Lorraine," said Natalie, in a dull acquiescence. She had lost, she thought, the trick of giving pleasure. That Lorraine would never lack.

"I shall be happy enough with Lorraine. Listen to her, child. That 's the way."

At twilight Natalie was laying out what Dick had once called her wedding gown. It was a sheer white fabric, with embroidery as delicate as cobwebs. She moved about slowly, making herself sweet in a dream, as if she were a bride; but it was not a happy dream. It was only a remembrance of the things that had been, and a forecasting of what might be. Yet when she thought of what might be, it was only a winter death and the covering snow. And the only thing not to be desired was that the snow would be so cold. Warm from her bath and with her hair about her, as it had dried into little passionate tendrils, she looked at herself in the glass with an impartial interest, wondering if beauty or charm, such as she had, would serve her one night more. She hoped he would not find in her face what she knew was in her heart: a certainty that the day of life was over for her, and that she was as a bride who had died before the wedding night. She put on the white dress, and went down to supper.

"You look like a ghost," said Lorraine, throwing her a kiss from the other side of the table, "a lovely ghost. The ghost of a bride! Dear Natalie!"

Dick's place was laid for him, but he had not come. As they rose from the table, Lorraine slipped her arm through Natalie's and drew her toward the library.

"Come and talk, dear," she said, with a pretty insistence. "Come!"

"No! no!" said Natalie. "No!" Her own voice sounded dreadful to her. "I am too busy."

"Busy, in that dress? You'll ruin it."

Natalie hurried away upstairs, and in the dark of her chamber watched for him to come. One of her windows faced the front, and the other overlooked the orchard. She walked softly from one to the other, because he might appear either from Gilbert's or the train; but there was no sound either of step or opening door, and the dark baffled her. At eight o'clock, she went downstairs again, just as Gilbert Horne stepped in.

"Is n't Dick coming down?" she heard him ask Lorraine.

"No, Mr. Horne. He telephoned me."

"Why is n't he coming?"

"He is too busy. He meets us at the train in town."

Natalie went in and stood warming her hands at the fire, looking at Lorraine. The look was so steady and so strange that Lorraine met it, at last, with one of inquiry, though she was telling Katharine a story of love gone wrong.

"What is it, Natalie?" she broke off to ask.

"Nothing," said Natalie.

"Did you ask me something?"

"No, I did n't ask you anything."

She wanted to add, "No, I asked you nothing; but I want to ask you something. Why did he send to you? Why not to me? Could n't he have come out, for old love's sake, to say good-by? Let us talk about it. Let us reason together. Why is love so unloving, and pleasure so unkind?" But if it had been possible to drag truth from behind the screen where she lies decently concealed, she knew Lorraine's answer. Lorraine would have thought no worse of her for that intemperance. She would have said, "Dear Natalie!"

The story continued, and Natalie went out of the room; but halfway up the stairs Lorraine's voice arrested her.

"So she went mad and he shot himself."

"I knew them," said Elinor. Her voice vibrated. It had a sound of championship, as if she spoke unwillingly and yet must add her word. "She thought he did n't love her."

"I don't know," said Lorraine, in a sweet impartiality. "He shot himself."

"She thought he did n't love her!" repeated Madam Walsingham. She struck her hand upon her open palm, in a fierce commentary. "I knew her, too. She tied herself up into knots expecting things no man can give."

"What things?" asked Katharine.

"Daily sentiment, hourly twaddle! Bless the woman! he did n't even know she wanted them. When he married her, he supposed, like other men, he 'd clinched his bargain. But no! he found there was a tax on goods he thought he owned. Well, he paid his scot. He shot himself."

"It was terrible," said Elinor. "She was an unhappy woman."

"How long is this going to last?" asked Madam Walsingham, turning suddenly upon Katharine.

"What, Madam Walsingham?"

"This warfare between men and women, this living in separate houses of life and eating different bread. How long is it going to last?"

Katharine did not answer, but her face spoke for her. She clasped her hands on her knees, and waited.

"They must not exact things," said Elinor. "They must prefer each other."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said the old lady. "Women have got to be sane. They have got to accept life as it is. Marriage is n't an examination paper on psychology. And for the men — do you know what they 've got to have? Courage."

"Courage!" repeated Katharine involuntarily.

"Courage, will, strength, power! The most sentimental of you adore a man if he 's got those. You 'll choose his way, and like it better than your own."

Natalie had not stayed to hear it all. Talk of that sort struck her as very futile. She could not formulate. She only wished Dick had come home. But she took off her white dress and laid it carefully away, and when she got into bed, couched there with folded hands, tired and not hopeful of any rest. Lorraine came to her door, at ten, but she did not answer, and later she heard Lorraine call to her grandmother that dear Natalie was asleep. She lay in a strange quiescence, in a way not conscious of her body, though there moved in her without ceasing that pain we know as heartache. Chiefly she was thankful that so great a disappointment had passed without wrecking her completely. Toward morning she slept, and it was daylight when Lorraine summoned her, outside the door.

"Come and say good-by!"

She struggled out of her lethargy.

"Is it time?" she asked.

"Almost time. We 're going in twenty minutes."

She began dressing with numb fingers, in no great haste because it seemed unimportant whether she were there or not. Grannie, she knew, hated farewells among other superfluities, and Lorraine, if she ever remembered the lack of them, would only say, "Dear Natalie!" But in a moment Elinor was at the door.

"What is it?" called Natalie, without opening to her.

"Mr. Horne has come — Mr. Richard. He wants to say good-by to you."

Things had gone far when his name awoke no flooding courage in her. She thanked Elinor, and went back to her glass. She was in gray, a dress bought through some odd impulse and now, by one as foolish, selected for the moment's irony. Her face matched it.

"I am hideous," she said to herself, and then sat down by the window looking out at the waiting sleigh. Katharine was on the front seat, already rubbing her cheeks from the sting of cold.

"It does n't matter," said Natalie aloud, and began picking the fringe of the table cover where use had tangled it.

She heard Dick's voice outside the door. "Natalie! Come out and say good-by!"

"I can't come out," she answered sweetly. "Good-by! Good luck!"

"Are n't you dressed yet? Why are n't you dressed?"

"Good-by, Dick," she said again. "Good-by."

She heard them call him from below, and he went running down the stairs. Then she turned away from the window; but she heard the voices and the bells.

XXIV

HUNTED INTO CORNERS

When Katharine came back from the station she was tingling with cold, and more than that, with life. On the way upstairs she saw Natalie lingering at the doorway of her own old room with the dull look of one who ought to be interested in it and is so no more. Suddenly Katharine realized that Natalie also must be reckoned with; there were changes coming, and she must know. She took Natalie's hand and drew her inside the room left barren by Madam Walsingham's going. There in the light she paused a moment, noting the subdued quiet of the girl's face. Natalie looked like one who has taken on the patience of middle age without its ripening. Katharine laughed a little.

"I am much embarrassed," she said. "But I must out with it. Natalie, I 'm not going to live here any longer."

Natalie turned to her in a mild surprise.

"Not live here?" she repeated. "Have you sold the place?"

Katharine was for a moment abashed before a younger woman asked to accept crude facts without their subtleties. But she spoke with an added dignity.

"I am going to leave Brice. We shall not live together any more."

"Then this house will be given up?"

"I don't know. At any rate I shan't be here. Why, Natalie, you 're glad!"

A look of relief had run over her face and moved it briefly. She was buoyed, for the moment, on a wave too slight to be called gladness. Again she thought it was not possible to take up her old life here. She might bear it somewhere else, but not starvation in the cell where chinks and crannies were familiar.

"What will Brice do?" she asked.

"I don't know, Natalie."

Natalie was silent a moment before she asked rather timidly, —

"You don't want to tell me where you are going, cousin Katharine?"

It was incredible that so little intimacy should have grown up between them in these years. This might have been one stranger interrogating another.

"I shall be in town, in some lodging house. That 's all I know." At that hint of freedom, Katharine lost her momentary reserve. She glowed again with the desire of life, and a slight reflection of that aura passed over Natalie.

"I could have a little room in town, too," she said, half to herself. "Cousin Katharine, when are you going?"

"As soon as possible."

Natalie rose, and stood there, playing with the chain about her neck.

"Then I won't settle in my rooms again," she said. "I 'll get my things in order and be ready."

Katharine also went about new tasks, assorting, making lists, and setting aside her own small property.

Elinor helped her, and the maids wondered at such unseasonable cleaning, — neither spring nor fall. Natalie, among her own possessions, also worked breathlessly, uplifted for the moment by anticipation. She could almost fancy she was going on a journey. She had no real hope that the new life would be better than the old. Only it would be different.

Three days were over, and then Brice, coming home one night at eight, found Katharine awaiting him. He laid down his evening paper with a pathetic renunciation. He had read the financial column in the train, but the rest was still in store; no fireside peace was possible with that joy untasted.

"Where's father?" he asked, hoping at least for the support of a sympathetic presence.

"He has gone to bed," said Katharine, closing the library door upon them. "He was feeling tired."

"I'll go up," said Brice, with alacrity half for his father and something for himself in his undefended state.

"Not quite yet, Brice. Give me half an hour."

"I've got to see how my father is," protested Mannering fractiously.

"Not yet! Brice, I'm going to leave you."

"Oh Lord, Kate! is this going on forever? I've got a cold on my chest. Where's that medicine that's got camphor in it?"

Katharine spoke softly; unlike her cry of protest, this was the small voice of certitude.

"But, Brice, I'm going to leave you now!"

He threw himself into his chair, and stretched his legs out to the blaze. He coughed a little, in a futile fashion, with the unformulated feeling that almost any woman would be moved when a man was coming down with bronchitis, or worse.

"Now?" he repeated somewhat satirically. He wanted to add that if it were now, he might find the library door unguarded, and go up to see his father. Katharine sat down and regarded him as one dealing with a stranger whom she would fain use well. All her tempestuous arguments seemed of late to have become cool certainties. She looked gentle and sweet, — a woman bent on having her own will, but only through grave consideration.

"I think I can be out of the house in two weeks," she said. "I ought to tell you now, so that you can make your plans."

He came bolt upright, and stared at her with widened eyes.

"For God's sake, Kate," he asked at length, "where are you going?"

"I shall try to live in town. I know I can manage it, if I get work. We shall see."

She spoke with an assured determination. He continued looking at her, though now his eyes were full of awe rather than pure wonder. So, he thought, she had gone mad at last.

"For the Lord's sake, Kate," he asked "what set you out on this new rig?"

They sat for a moment regarding each other. Then she spoke with the same courteous gravity.

"Don't you really know, Brice, what has set me out?"

"No, I don't, as I 'm a living sinner. I 've been a good husband. You 've got a comfortable home. I 'll be hanged if I know."

Once she would have fallen into stormy declamation, but now it hardly seemed to matter whether he understood or not. She only felt the more apart from him.

"Don't you remember I 've been talking about this for the last ten — yes, fifteen years?" she asked.

"Talking! yes, of course I do."

"Has n't it meant anything to you, Brice?"

"Talk! talk!" he muttered.

"I know. And the talk never meant anything. Well, now it won't be talk. I 'm going."

He looked at his correct shoes, held comfortably to the fire, and suddenly roused himself to face a moral exigency. The force of this new mood was great; he hurled his words like missiles.

"Katharine, do you think you 're doing right?"

"I don't know, Brice," she said gravely, and with the sweetness to be accorded a friend who had a right to question her. "Truly, I don't know. But I 'm going."

"I don't believe a word of it."

"I 'm sorry. Because you 'll be surprised some day."

"Well, if you do lose your head and cut off somewhere, what is to become of father?"

"He and you could board comfortably in town. You know I proposed that."

"You 've proposed about everything under the sun, first and last," said Brice unhappily.

"Or, if you felt you could go on here, you might have a housekeeper. But this is Gilbert Horne's property. We must never forget that."

Brice meditated that one was not likely to forget anything while memory still served her; but the habit of courtesy prevailed, and he held his peace. Katharine, through long study of him, knew some of the things he was thinking, and now she sat reflecting, with a mild interest, that he must hate her exceedingly. But Brice never did anything in large measure. She only made him most uncomfortable. She rose now, and presented her last proposition.

"There 's Natalie, Brice. Have you straightened out her affairs?"

He sat in silent protest, staring at the fire. She was distasteful to him, at that moment; he could not look at her. Yet he had no stored resentments. If she had smiled and promised better fashions, he could have sought his newspaper in a cheerful zeal.

"Natalie, must be paid," she said again. "I shall see to that."

The frown deepened in his forehead. It looked like the sign of a willful and ugly purpose. But she still waited, and decency called on him to speak.

"Natalie's business is in my hands. I shall attend to it when I get round,— when I get round, I say."

"It must be soon, then, or I shall put it into the hands of Gilbert Horne."

She had not mentioned Horne since that other day when Brice had thrown the name at her. He had forgotten that. He only knew now that Horne was here in prospect, a most unwelcome visitant. He got up and shook himself, like an animal stung from sleep.

"Horne!" he repeated. "Why Horne, for God's sake?"

"Because," said Katharine, choosing her words carefully, "it is evident that Natalie must have some man to stand behind her. And Gilbert Horne will do it."

She went out, leaving the door open, and at the same instant Natalie, in her silent way, slipped in. Mannering heard the advancing flutter of a gown, and looked up to find another foe upon him. It seemed like concerted action, and he was tempted to make short work of Natalie. But courtesy constrained him, and he smiled at her, stretching out a hand toward that neglected evening paper.

"It 's rather chilly here," he said, immersing himself in print, with a great crackling of pages. "I 'll start up the fire in a minute. Don't sit here, Natalie. Colds are very prevalent just now."

Natalie stood there looking absently past him, and fingering the chain about her neck. She was considering what she had to say. But since it was difficult, she began without flourishes, and plunged into as crude a phrasing as ever Katharine had used:

"Have you seen Fiske and Bailey?"

"No, I have n't," said Mannering, laying down the paper and facing her. But at the quick trouble of her look, he temporized. "Natalie, this won't do, you know. You must n't drive me into corners. Of course I 've seen them. But it 's confidential. Business can't be discussed like this, you know; it really can't."

"What are their terms?"

She might as well have asked him for the number of red herrings in the sea. Save in the little details touching his dress and his ways of life, he abhorred particulars. He spoke like a child coerced into saying a lesson but half learned.

"I can't tell you that, Natalie. It's confidential. Don't you understand what that is — confidential?"

She collected her brooding thoughts, and brought them to bear on him. For the first time she began to consider cousin Brice in the light of an individual capable of action in a serious world. Why was Katharine going to leave him? Would the traits the other woman might have found impossible affect him in his outer dealings? She spoke with slow emphasis, as one speaks to impress a vacillating mind: —

"Cousin Brice, you must understand how important all this is. I want that business done. If it can't be done by you, I must go to somebody else."

"There! there! there, Natalie!" he chanted, in a tone he had hitherto kept for Katharine alone. It seemed to him that the complexion of life was entirely matrimonial. Having got rid of one woman, he was to all intents saddled with another using the same catchwords. "Don't I tell you I'll do it? Only give me time. The more haste, the less speed."

"I wonder," she said to herself, as if she had not heard him, "whether I ought to speak to Gilbert Horne."

"Great guns!" cried Mannering. "I should think Horne had made the world in six days, by the way you women talk!"

But Natalie had not heard. She was still reflecting, and as he knew, on Horne. Policy constrained him, and he recalled his ordinary ease. He balanced on his toes, and swung his eyeglass cheerfully. He even laughed a little, to reassure the feminine mind.

"See here, Natalie," he said jocosely, "the train is laid. Fiske and Bailey give me an answer in three days. When they send it to me, I pass it on to you. There, now! that 's a business confidence. You 've wormed it out of me. Lovely woman, you know! she gets there every time."

"Three days!" repeated Natalie. "That will be on Thursday."

"Thursday. Yes, quite so, Thursday."

"Very well, then, Brice. Thursday night I shall ask you about it again." She went gravely away, but Mannering called after her when she was outside the door, —

"Now mind you, not a word to Horne!"

When she was really gone, and he heard the lessening rustle of her dress above, he glanced about the room and breathed free air. He would not have been surprised at an interminable line of women, all coming to ask foolish things. He looked at his paper. It had lost its savor since the place itself, where it had nightly reading, was no longer sacred to him. He slipped out into the hall, as if his enemies might pursue, and upstairs to his father. The old man was sleeping soundly, but as Brice stood looking at him, he awoke.

"Nine chances out of ten he won't be here to-night," he said fretfully; and then, as Brice laid a hand on his shoulder and tucked the sheet in closer, he added like a delighted child: "I said he 'd come to-night. Well, well, my son! well, well!"

Brice sat down by the bedside, and put his face down to his father's in a caressing intimacy.

"There, father, there!" he said. "I shall always come. Father!"

"Yes, my son, yes!"

"Father, you know we always wanted to go abroad?"

"To Greece, my boy, the land of the free — no, no, the land of poetry and song."

"Yes, father. Well, we 're going. We 're going soon. Don't you tell, father, not a soul, and some fine morning they 'll wake up and find us missing."

"Give me a drink of water, Brice," said the captain. He sat up and smacked his lips over it, as if he found it choice. He held up the glass like one giving a toast, and quoted something about libations and hecatombs of beeves. Then he lay down again and went off to sleep, chuckling, —

"Gods and goddesses! and nymphs, Brice, — nymphs!"

XXV

FOR NATALIE

THE three days passed, and Mannering stayed in town. On the fourth morning Natalie went in to his office, and was told that he was away on business; he had left no message. Thereupon she wrote a letter at his desk, to remind him of her. But a summons might as well have been tossed into space; there was no answer. Meantime she had been looking for lodgings, while the other two women went about together on the same quest. Elinor had ceased urging Katharine to join fortunes with her. She understood that because Katharine longed for it, therefore she refused it. There might be softness and security in the home they could make together; but Katharine, according to her own mind, had no right to palliations. She was leaving Brice to an uncertain future; and she would fare no better than he, her yokefellow in misfortune.

Natalie, well used to a solitary life, had no thought of joining her lot to theirs. She only went about and made her own silent plans, like a little mateless animal hoarding for the cold.

At the end of the sixth day Brice came home. Some purpose or some apprehension had made inroads on his assumed serenity. He looked as if he had done a great deal of work and some worrying. This time he did not wait for Natalie to pounce. He met her in the hall as she came down to dinner, and hailed her in a consequential whisper.

"I 've got 'em! Fiske and Bailey! Not a word now. It 's confidential."

Natalie felt the uplifting of unexpected joy.

"Have you done it, Brice?" she cried. "Have you?"

"I have n't done it. I 've begun it. There 's a rhyme for you, Natalie. Done, begun! begun, done!"

The captain was standing in the library door waiting for his son to come and hear the news of the day: how his luncheon had not agreed with him, though a pepsin tablet had made all well, and how he had been wondering whether a lung protector would not supplement a winter thickness of flannels. He caught the last words and stood repeating them in a childish glee: "Done, begun! begun, done!"

"Tell me about it, Brice," urged Natalie.

He shook his head. He was graver than the sphinx.

"Not yet, Natalie, not yet! Next week will show you."

"But you 'll write to Richard?"

"Not yet, Natalie. Not for a week."

"Don't keep me in the dark, Brice. You might trust me."

"Business is business," said Mannering. He was about to say it again when he remembered that Katharine had once enjoined him to avoid vain repetitions, with the pungent addendum that they savored of age. He frowned, and looked a manful tolerance. "You would n't understand it, if I told you. Besides, it 's confidential. In one week more I shall have their answer. That 's all I can say."

Without waiting for her, he went in to dinner. As events pressed upon him and the need of escape grew more and more urgent, he began to neglect the minor courtesies. Natalie, puzzled yet manifestly cheered, followed him.

No one had heard a word from the travelers since they reached Toronto. There Madam Walsingham and Lorraine had written their duty letters. Both were sent before Lorraine's first appearance, and both contained the usual civilities of a guest. Dick had not written, and Natalie looked but languidly at the daily mail. She knew he would not write. This was not the first long absence that had been also a long silence. It was one of the ways of freedom. There was no unkindness in it: only some slothful complaisance toward one who always understood. Years ago her name in his hand had given her a vital pleasure she could hardly, now, recall; later, when she was taking on the habits of daily poverty, she watched for letters that never came, and sickened over the lack. But all that was done with. She was used to bankruptcy. Little things concerned her no more; and even great ones, so far as she had any part in them, were shadowy as mountains through a mist.

During that next week, Brice had the effect of whispering in corners with his father. He talked to him in the library where they were left more and more alone, and followed him upstairs, to hold long conclaves. At first, the old man looked like a child delighted with a secret, and hugged it to his heart. He would stop the women, as they went by his chair, and begin, "Now what do you think?" and then, remembering that he had been trusted, chuckle "No! no! no!" and refuse to finish. But when other days followed, and Brice was again staying in town, he grew troubled as if the secret had become a burden he was unused to carrying alone; and one morning he went to the library door, while Katharine was taking off her wraps in the hall, and beckoned her. She came at once, and he shut the door behind her.

"What is it, captain?" she asked gently. In that moment she saw anew what she had been noticing for a long time: his doting state, the swiftness with which age had come upon him. He got her a chair with a laborious courtesy, and when she was seated, drew another up in front of her. His eyes were full of tears, and his voice fell into whimpering.

"I don't like it, after all," he said. "Katie, I don't like it."

"What is it, captain?" she asked again. She put her firm hand over the veined one on his knee. He was a neutral creature, she thought, with no more blood than Brice; but she had pity for the old age in him.

"I said I would n't tell," he began beseechingly. "But this ain't telling. I 'm only talking it over, ain't I? You won't tell, Katie, will you?"

"No, captain, I won't tell."

The old man whispered now, —

"He thinks I want to go to Greece. I did want it, but I 've got over it. We do get over things, this winter weather, don't we, Katie?"

"Yes, captain, we get over lots of things."

"Brice said I must n't tell. He said we 'd go into town the day before and pack our things. He said we could get new things, so as not to have it known. But I don't want new things, Katie. I want my old ones."

The blood came into Katharine's face. She took her hand from his, as if the touch had forced him into speech, and even that seemed to her an unfair constraining.

"So you were not to tell," she said to herself. "You two were to go away, and you were not to tell!"

"To Greece, you know, Katie," said the old man piteously. His wet eyes implored her. It was the look of a helpless creature seeking refuge. "I want to go to Greece. Of course I want to. The land of Homer, Katie! Seven cities claimed him, you remember, seven cities. But I don't think I could go to Greece in winter weather. I feel the cold. You know I feel the cold."

"Yes," said Katharine absently, "of course you feel the cold." But she was thinking of Brice, and wondering how to meet him.

He brightened. His troubles seemed to him quite over. He even laughed a little, as he did when he had reached the conclusion of an after dinner story.

"Better to read about it in winter weather, Katie!" he announced rejoicingly. "That 's what we 'll do, read about it, you and I. I 'll translate it for you, and look up all the words. That 's it, Katie. We 'll read about it. We won't go."

Katharine rose and stood looking thoughtfully before her.

"You fix it, Katie," said the old man, taking up his Homer, and bending vacuous eyes upon the fire. "You fix it. Don't you let me go."

She put her hand on his shoulder, and soothed him into the apathy he called comfort. Then she left him to his book and nap, and went in to Elinor, who was darning table linen by the dining-room window. She looked like a sweet young housewife at her task — a foolish task, perhaps, but belonging to Katharine's stewardship. Katharine stopped before her, big with speech.

"What is it, Kate?" asked Elinor.

Katharine opened her lips and then closed them the more tightly.

"The captain is growing old," she said irrelevantly.

"He is old."

"Yes, but we are things for a long time without showing them. Age comes by leaps and bounds. We look just the same for years, and then we 're forty. We accept that and stop minding, and then we have an illness or some more wrinkles, and we 're fifty. I never thought the captain was much older than Brice; but all at once he 's broken. When shall I break, too?"

Elinor looked up briefly from her work.

"Not yet," she said. "You don't look thirty."

"What will it be when I do," said Katharine absently, trying to keep her mind for a moment from the new coil to be untangled, — "when something breaks and I look my age? Shall I buy futile beautifiers, and always wear a veil, and hold my head high to deny my double chin, and narrow my eyes to ease the wrinkles under them? No, Nell, no! we won't do that. We 'll live and be honest, and then we 'll die. But life itself — Nell, it 's a tough experience."

"Perhaps it 's very simple, after all."

"Yes, for folks like you who have some sort of theory. Pray for me, Nell, pagan gods or Christian, I don't mind which. For Brice, too! Pray for us and mend our tablecloths."

Brice came home, and Katharine regarded him with a new glance, one of a keener interest born from knowledge of his purpose. He had the usual evening confidence with his father, undisturbed; but when the captain had gone to bed, she sought him out where he was hoping for an hour to himself by the fire. He laid down his paper. He had done with feints. The hope of warding off a persistent woman was, experience told him, vain. But she was disarming. She looked sweet and womanly — almost, his surprised glance told him, wifely, too.

"Brice!" she said, as if she addressed a stranger whom she meant to mollify, "you must think twice before you take your father abroad in winter weather."

His mouth opened in a futile gasp.

"He never could bear it in the world," said Katharine, in the way of one who shares counsel in a common cause. "It would be pulling him up by the roots. He is an old man. Don't do it, Brice."

It was not a trap, but his credulity made it one. She was friendly, and he met her like a confidant.

"I 've got to get away, Katie," he said, with a breath of relief at their new accord. "There 's the devil of a complication here, and I must get away from it."

"What sort of a complication?"

"Natalie 's at the bottom of it. She 's hounding me for money to spend on Dick Horne. I 've got to get away for a time while things blow over."

"Why not settle her affairs? Then you could go with an easy mind."

"I could n't go at all."

"I see. There is n't enough for Natalie and you, too. Is that it, Brice?"

In her anxiety to induce a reasonable mood between them, she had softened her voice to the point of sympathy. It disarmed him anew; the last remnant of suspicion died in him.

"That 's precisely it, Katie," he said confidentially. "If I can get out now, I shall be doing the best thing all round."

"How about the business?"

"I shall leave it in Willard's hands."

"Is he competent?"

"Willard has been a clerk under me for nine years," said Mannering pompously. "He knows all the ins and outs." For the moment, he forgot her unwilling share in his last venture. She seemed merely a friendly voice from an indifferent world. He leaned forward now and whispered. "Hang the business! Let it go to the dogs. I 've made a good thing out of 'Hearts Inspired.' That 's all that concerns me."

Katharine got up out of her chair, and went to the door. "Natalie!" she called. "Natalie!"

Her voice rang like a bell. The blood within her was thick in shame and anger, but she felt only the necessity to act. The method might be dramatic, but that would help sway him. Natalie came at once, with the promptness of one who has been awaiting a summons. It was an innocent haste, but it seemed to Brice collusion, as it had that other day, and he, too, felt anger. Natalie glanced from one to the other in grave inquiry. Her pallor, her soft gravity, gave her something of Katharine's look, the censuring gaze he hated. He had a human abhorrence of being forgiven for unknown offenses.

"Brice," said Katharine, "tell Natalie."

He sat in silence, the red of anger mounting to his forehead.

"Tell Natalie," repeated Katharine. She spoke with authority, and her height and poise made her majestic. She was like judge and executioner in one. "Then I must tell her. Natalie, we have done an abominable thing by you. We have spent your money."

"Spent my money?" she repeated, in a gentle incredulity, as one accepts a trivial loss.

"Brice had your property. It has all gone into the business. It is swallowed up there. You can't have it, Natalie — yet."

The complexion of her speech gave him momentary hope. Since she identified herself with him, she seemed to be paving a way of escape.

"No, Natalie," he said, in easy corroboration, "you can't have it — yet."

Natalie gave them a difficult attention. "I do not understand," she said appealingly, to Katharine. "Used? Swallowed up? It was a lot of money."

"Not so very much, Natalie," said Mannering cheerfully, "not a fortune, as fortunes go nowadays. Something to manipulate, as you might say." His self-sufficiency had come back, and he smiled at them as one who had done well with what material he had. There was no hope for him. Gentleness and prudence were without avail, and that being so, Katharine gave way to her emotions as they came.

"We won't talk platitudes, any of us," said she. There were white marks on her cheeks, as if a hand had struck her there. She was an angry woman. "We won't tell you we are sorry we have stolen your money, Natalie, and you need n't tell us it is of no consequence. We will simply try to get it back. There is no way of getting it back except by applying to the neighbors. Go over and ask Gilbert Horne to come here at once."

"I'll be damned if he does!" He was on his feet, using the futile gesticulation of a man who has never convinced anybody in his life, but has noted the methods of other men.

"Go, Natalie! Go and get Gilbert Horne," Katharine repeated. "Do what I tell you. This is the only way."

Natalie turned in a dazed fashion, and at the door she looked back in deprecation of her errand. But Katharine made an imperative gesture, and the girl obeyed it. When she had crossed the sill, Katharine closed the door after her and stood there facing Brice. She was keeping him a prisoner by the force of her spirit, and though he raged inwardly, he knew he should remain.

"I won't have Horne in this house," he announced, in a fractious menace. She said nothing. He walked across the floor and back again. "For God's sake, Katie," he cried, mounting to a pitch of fretfulness, "what do you want to bring Horne into this for?"

Her anger had settled into the steady current of unhindered rage.

"Chiefly because he has two fists. He can keep you here while I tell him you are a swindler, and ask him how your thefts are to be made good. You do not leave this house until these things are settled."

He was listening.

"Hark!" he said. "Father! Was n't that father calling?"

She, too, listened. There was no sound save the blowing of a gusty wind against the pane.

"It is father," said Mannering cunningly. "Let me go, Katie. Something 's happened! Let me go."

Involuntarily she stepped aside from the door, and he dashed out and up the stairs. She followed him into the hall, and at the moment, Natalie, bareheaded as she had run through the orchard, came in with Gilbert Horne. She walked straight up to Katharine. She was very white, but her face held sorrowful resolve.

"I have brought him, cousin Katharine," she said. "But I have not told him. I have had time to think. We can't do anything about this, without disgrace and trouble. If the money has gone, let it go. It was my luck. It is because I wanted to use it in a forbidden way. It 's of no use. Everything blocks me there."

"Let it go?" repeated Katharine rapidly, hearkening as she spoke. "No, no, Natalie, we shan't let it go. Mr. Horne, listen to me. Brice has stolen Natalie's money. He is going abroad with it. Don't let him get out of this house. He will try to slip away tonight, he and his father. If he comes down these stairs, stop him. My God! if I were a man!"

"It 's of no use," said Natalie again. Her teeth were chattering with excitement added to the chill of her dash into the night. "I wanted him to take my money and buy out Fiske and Bailey for me — for Dick. He said they were considering it" —

"He said!" repeated Katharine, in a rage that seemed like scorn of herself also. "He lied."

"Fiske and Bailey have sold out to a New York firm," said Horne. He was conscious of not having the situation in hand, but he contributed such data as he possessed. "The papers had it to-night."

Natalie looked at him for a moment, a smile creeping over her face. She recognized her old foe, destiny.

"Never mind, cousin Katharine," she said, with a quiet certitude, "it is of no consequence."

"Of no consequence!" repeated Katharine.

"No. I wanted the money for a certain purpose. I might have known I could n't buy a thing like that. It 's of no consequence."

"What are you going to live on? It may be all you had!"

"It does n't really matter," said Natalie again. She returned to the library, and took up a book. She sat down and seemed to be reading it, and Katharine, watching her for a moment, realized that the blow had changed her. She beckoned Horne.

"You must help her," she said, in a low tone. "He must not leave this house until something has been settled."

Horne cast a glance about the hall, and she interpreted.

"Yes, I know," she added. "You think it is not the usual thing to keep a man prisoner in his own house. Well, somebody 's got to do it. I wish it could be I, but I 'm not strong enough. It must be you."

XXVI

SNOW

Brice went into his father's room, softly for all his haste. The night lamp was burning, and the old man, under his mask of pallor, lay in a sleep that looked like death. Brice stood still at the bedside and watched him, overcome for the moment by the proven certainty that his father was very old. He laid his hand on the captain's shoulder.

"Father," he whispered, "Father!"

The captain came uneasily awake.

"Well, well, now, Brice! so you've got home," he babbled. "We can read a little together, can't we? Well! well!"

Brice drew him to a sitting posture.

"Father," said he, "do you think you could get up now and dress?"

"Dress," said the captain. "Why, it's night-time, sonny."

"Yes, father, I know. Come, you put your feet right out of bed."

"I'm warm here, Brice, warm. You ought to consider that."

Mannering wrapped a blanket about the shrunken shoulders, pathetic in their lack of brave devices, tailor-made. He spoke with the concentration of one whose purposes depend on calm.

"You get up, father, and I'll dress you. It won't hurt you. It'll do you good. We'll go to town, father, by the late train. We'll go to the best hotel. There's plenty of money where I can put my hand on it. Chirk up now, father! I know what I'm doing."

The old man looked at him in a vacuous wonderment. Some perplexity was there also, like that of a child dragged from a dear retreat. He sat there silent. He seemed to be listening.

"Don't you hurry me, Brice," he said at length, but not as if it mattered. "Don't you hurry me."

Brice drew the blanket tighter about his shoulders.

"You sit there a minute and think it over," he counselled, with a heartening warmth. "I'll throw something into a bag, and be back in a minute."

He hurried into his own room, and the old man looked after him, in the dim light. Then he put off the blanket, and tried stealthily to get out of bed. He had thought of Katharine. She would save him from these sudden madnesses of Brice.

When Mannering came back, he found him still in bed, but huddled forward as he had fallen. He put his hand on him and cried to him; but there was no answer. Then he turned him, with a gentle ruthlessness, and read his face. It had changed in an inexplicable way, as if the will had lost control of it. The eyes seemed to be living, in a strange remoteness; the lips refused to speak. Mannering ran to the stairs, and called sharply, —

"Katharine! Katharine!"

In a moment she was there, Gilbert Horne behind her.

"My father is dying!" announced Mannering, in a loud tone, as they entered. "Look at him! You 've killed him, amongst you."

Horne pushed past him, and went up to the bed. The captain's eyes met his vaguely, and the lips twitched after words.

"You 're all right, captain," said Horne. "Warm enough? Mrs. Mannering will get you another blanket." But while Katharine bent solicitously over the pillow, he left the room and motioned Brice to follow.

"It 's a stroke," he said rapidly, in the country phrasing. "He can't manage his lips or his hand. Did you see? I 'll telephone for Drummond. Go back in there and keep your mouth shut. Don't tell him he 's done for."

Brice with a white face, went in again, and found Katharine trying to feed the old man with drops of brandy from the table near at hand. He took them obediently. He seemed in no way disturbed, but only as a worn-out creature whose machinery has broken down. Presently he closed his eyes, and Katharine began to get hot-water bags and blankets. After that she sat down at one side of the bed, and watched him drifting into a sleep that looked like lethargy. Brice drew up a chair on the other side, and took his father's hand. Tears were in Mannering's eyes, and Katharine, as she looked, saw his lips move, and wondered if he could be praying.

At eleven the doctor came, Drummond, from town, Dick's friend and an occasional visitor. He was a young man, sandy and strong, deprecatory of his own value in all walks save medicine, where he knew his way. He had a gay good-nature in the ante-rooms of life and an iron precision over his work. He came into the room with an alert step, bowed to Katharine, and adjusted his glasses on his nose. He nodded at Horne then, and Mannering, seeing the unmoved gravity of the professional face, gave it swift interpretation. A groan escaped him, and gently releasing himself from his father's hand, he went into the hall. There, ten minutes later, the doctor followed him. Brice took the verdict upon his own lips.

"My father has had a shock," he said in a whisper.

Drummond nodded.

"He won't get over this," Brice continued, looking at the floor, and shaking his head. "He won't get over it."

"He may last some time," said Drummond; but Mannering interrupted him angrily.

"He won't get over it. I am going to lose my father!"

Katharine came out then, and Drummond turned to her. "I'll send you down a nurse," said he, "to-morrow morning."

"No! no!" Mannering broke in peremptorily. "I won't have a nurse. I shall take care of my father myself."

"You don't understand, Mannering," said the doctor. "He'll be far more comfortable with a nurse. Everybody is."

Again Brice made his denial, and Katharine put in a temporizing word. A strange enthusiasm had risen in her with the wave of sympathy she felt for Brice. She seemed to herself more human, more decent even, more like other women in sharing some emotion common to the hearth. If she could foster even the smallest seed of what was lacking in her duty toward him, she would do it, even through the most exacting tasks.

The doctor spent the night at Gilbert Horne's, and Brice watched beside his father. Katharine was with him, at intervals, but though he took things from her hand and followed her brief hints, he did not seem to see her.

Next morning Drummond came in again, and after liberal directions, went back to town. Katharine, with her husband, began their joint routine, with the absorption of those for whom the outward face of life has changed, and who undertake the day knowing that many of the same complexion are sure to follow. Elinor came down to breakfast unprepared for the new state of things, and she too adopted it, overseeing the household in quiet ways and sitting near the sick-room lest she should be wanted. But Brice stayed by his father. He saw nobody; he spoke only briefly and as he must. His eyes were ever on the sick man's face; his hand covered the helpless one outside the bed. He was an image of untrammeled grief; his cheeks were sodden with it. Katharine, in the pauses of her ministration, watched him curiously. Once she said to Elinor, when they met for a moment in her room, —

"Nell, he cares! Brice cares awfully."

"Of course he cares. It 's his father."

Katharine seemed absorbed in a wondering speculation.

"I thought he could n't care for anything," she owned. "I did n't think he had it in him."

"He was devoted to his father."

"Devoted, yes! But I thought it was only a kind of game they liked to play, like Homer and Minerva's eyes. Brice is a sealed book to me, Nell. I knew that before, but I thought it was a blank book. Perhaps there 's writing in it, after all."

At night, there was a message from Drummond proposing to delay coming until next day, if there proved to be no change, and offering to send a nurse. But again Brice refused the nurse, and the more testily now because he was tired. Neither he nor Katharine had slept since the beginning of their watch, and Elinor came into the room at six, where Katharine was arranging the table, with its spoons and glasses, and Brice sat sunken in a great chair by the bed. He was holding his father's hand. Elinor touched him on the shoulder.

"I 've had my supper, Brice," she said, with a friendly authority. "You and Katharine are to eat yours and lie down. I shall stay here till midnight. Then I 'll call one of you."

He made a brief remonstrance, but his eyelids dropped in spite of him. Finally he went, and Katharine followed. The old man still lay in his blessed stupor, and Elinor, at ease in the great chair, pondered upon his face. It had gained, in its relaxing, some of the serenity of death. The dignity which ought to be an old man's heritage, he seemed to have stored for his withdrawal. Elinor sat thinking of her father, subtly recalled by this vigil, so like, in many ways, to those last nights in Italy. Yet it was not the same: for the shaded dusk within the room was that of the New England world, and outside fine snow sifted against the windows with the sound of unseen draperies. In some mysterious way that sound recalled her. It broke through her musings, and summoned her back from the path her mind was taking toward the goals of life and death. She had been wondering over the progress of the soul, its mysterious journey hither, its troubled stay, and then this withdrawal into as great a mystery. She was thinking how simple the change seems when it comes, not subject to the dread of the flesh nor the sorrow of parting. It was as natural as life; nay, it was a part of life — but at that instant, as if the snow upon the window had been a voice for her alone, she sat upright in her chair, and her mind asked itself sharply, —

"Where is Natalie?"

It came upon her with the insistence of a voice marshaling facts because, for some hidden reason, it will be heard, that she had not seen Natalie all day. It was not strange, perhaps, in this turmoil of illness; but she had not seen her. She had eaten alone, listening for sounds from above stairs, and then, fearful lest Katharine should lack for food, taking little trays to her. The voice kept calling, and she sat there, hot with haste to be gone, and yet quieting her fears by commonplaces and the certainty that, for the present, she must be here. She gave the captain his medicine, and moved him on the pillow; but the snow was sifting against the glass and summoning her so strenuously now that she was angry with it. She went softly to the window, and putting her hands on either side of her face, looked out into the dark. The driving snow looked cruel; her mind asked her again, —

"Where is Natalie?"

At eleven Brice stepped softly in, still heavy with sleep. His anxiety peered sharply through his stupor, like eyes behind a veil.

"Is there any change?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I 'll stay with him," he said, but she was already on her way to the door. The voices clamored now. She sped up to Natalie's room and knocked, and then, not waiting for an answer, lifted the latch and looked in. There was no light.

"Natalie," she called softly, "Natalie."

The air struck cold upon her. She walked in, and passed her hand over the bed. It had not been slept in; after a brief and futile search for matches, she stood still an instant, and, warned by the quiet of the place, turned and ran downstairs. She looked into the library, where lamplight and firelight were lovely. Katharine lay on the sofa, warmly covered and sound asleep. Elinor glanced into the dining-room, and then the kitchen. No one was there. She turned back into the hall, and put on Katharine's high overshoes and a cloak. She drew the hood over her head and pinned it under her chin. Then, kilting her skirts high, she stepped out into the night, and with the snowflakes stinging on her face, ran down the drive. This was no time for the little friendly path. The orchard stood inviolate, like an enchanted country, all white and darkness. Strangely, she thought of it as she was running away from it, and of one day in May, when she had sat there on the grass laughing at Gilbert Horne, and looking up into the pink flutter of blossoms in the green, drunk with the sweetness of them and her youth and his. There were two trees he pointed out to her then, one sedate in green. It had not blossomed at all; but the tree beside it was sifted over white. That was the bride, he told her; the other was the bridegroom. And for no reason but the reason of youth, they had laughed then and felt the blood in their faces. But she hurried on through the snow, while her thoughts went the faster, and along the road and up the driveway to his house. There was a light in the library, and she pushed open the front door and went in to find him. The room was warm. Every corner in it spoke of him, as if it were a place he had just left. It was like the dream where we find rooms with no one in them. But she went through to the kitchen, and there was Cassie sitting in the big chair, leaning forward in a brooding maze. Elinor drew a breath of relief at human company.

"Cassie," she began, "I can't find Natalie."

Cassie rose to her feet.

"What do you want of her?" she asked practically.

"I must find her. Something has happened. She has gone away. Where is he, Cassie?"

"In the third story, walking up and down."

"Then we know where to find him. But you come with me, Cassie. We 'll go to one place first."

"Where?" Cassie was putting on a thick shawl and overshoes. She was pale of late, but it had given her robust beauty a softer touch; and now, in this response to Elinor's unknown purpose, she looked invincible. "Where?" she repeated.

Elinor whispered, not from intention but because her voice had failed her, —

"The house in the woods!"

Cassie looked thriftily to the lamps in the kitchen and library, and they went fighting their way into the dark. The snow was not so deep as hampering.

"There won't be much of it in the woods," said she, when they toiled into the field. "Stand still a minute." She stopped, and, getting in the lee of Elinor, lighted a match with difficulty and set it to the lantern's wick.

"We ought to have done that in the house," said Elinor, in the nervous interest awakened by trifles when great things are at stake.

"He 'd see it, no matter how I hid it," answered Cassie briefly. "He 's got eyes like a hawk."

Neither of them quite knew why Gilbert Horne must be denied their quest. In some unaccountable way they seemed to be shielding Natalie. It was woman against man, not to defend the woman, but to keep her from betraying the sick secrets of her heart. When they struck the logging road, the way was easier. The tops of the great pines, packed with snow, had shielded it; but in spite of the weight upon them they were moving in a winter uneasiness or a winter pleasure. There was a swaying of branches, and once a limb fell with a grinding progress. The wood stillness was broken by little creakings and snappings even through the muffling of the snow, because the wind was busy there above. Cassie was ahead, walking with bold, free strides, like a man. She stopped an instant in the clearing to get her breath, and then went forward to the little house and laid her hand upon the door.

"Stop," said Elinor, breathless at her side. "Some one is talking."

It was a woman's voice within. Elinor gave a little sob of quick relief. The expedition had changed at once into something human, and therefore destitute of terror.

"Knock," she said. "Who can it be?"

Cassie tapped on the door, and then pounded, but the talk continued. They listened for a moment and Cassie said, "It 's her voice."

She pushed open the door, and they went in. The dim light struggled feebly about the room. Cassie held the lantern over her head, and peered into the corner where the voice was babbling. There was Natalie. She lay on the couch, her feet together and her hands folded.

"The snow is very deep," she was saying, in a manner not her own. "There is nothing so terrible as snow."

There was no fire. Evidently there had been none for hours, for, warmed as they were from their walking, they felt the chill.

"Light the lamp, Cassie," said Elinor. Her teeth were chattering. It was the terror of the unknown. She went up to the couch and knelt there. She laid her hands on Natalie's and gently broke their clasp.

"Natalie," she said, "Natalie, we came to find you."

"The snow is deep," said Natalie, not turning her eyes upon her, nor seeming to speak to any one but that invisible witness which knew the secrets of her soul.

Cassie had lighted the lamp, and Elinor bent forward in a quick anticipation, to read what she might in the girl's face. It had two spots of color in the pale cheeks, and the eyes were glittering. But they did not return from vacancy. Elinor kept her hand on Natalie's, while she spoke over her shoulder, —

"You must go back for him, Cassie. Tell him we can't get her home alone."

Cassie nodded, but at the same instant she threw off her shawl, and began to lay a fire. She struck the match, and put it to the wood. The blaze crackled upward, and ate up more shadows in the room. "I 'm going," she said briefly. "We 'll be right back."

Elinor heard the door put softly to behind her. After that, and for what seemed a long time, Natalie was silent. Her eyes were closed, but she seemed not to be sleeping. Now she opened them again.

"I am lonesome," she said. "Anybody would be lonesome in the snow."

Elinor covered her with her cloak, and held her hands again.

"'He giveth snow like wool,'" said the voice in an awed rapidity. "'He scattereth the hoarfrost like ashes.'"

The tears were running down Elinor's cheeks. She loved the child, at that instant, more than she had ever loved anything. Natalie was so uncompanioned in the dark. The voice went on.

"'He giveth his snow like wool.' He can do everything. He can bury us in the snow and keep us there. We don't die, but we are buried. But we die at last." The voice rang sweetly, in a vivid triumph. "We die at last. Nobody can take it from us. We die at last. Don't let Dick know." The voice sank to a whisper. "It would trouble him. Dear old Dick! Dear boy! dear child! dear old darling!

Tell all the rest, but not Dick. He was good to Natalie, always good. Only he did n't love her. He could n't, dear old Dick! Keep him from her, too, the other one. She hurts him. Let him go away, miles and miles away, and forget them both. Let him have a horse and a dog and a gun, let him dance if he wants to. There must be a woman for him somewhere. Not these two! One hurt him and the other wore him out. Poor old Dick! They must n't be allowed to hurt him." Suddenly she turned her uneasy head upon the pillow, and her eyes met Elinor's. Elinor's breath stopped. For the moment, Natalie seemed to be recalled. But the eyes held hers, with no recognition in them, only a sort of wonder. "So you came," said the voice. "The angel of the Lord! But you must n't let me decide anything to-night. Let me lie here. Dick made this bed for me. Only he made it out of snow. Listen." She struggled to a sitting posture and whispered: "We must never love them too much. If we do, we must hide it, hide it. And we must n't try to do things for them. Not too many things. God won't have it. He sends the snow, and then we can't get through the drifts. Did you get through the drifts?" The question, with its courteous inflection, sounded sane, and Elinor was about answering, when the door opened in a noiseless haste, and Gilbert Horne came in. The flakes lay like dust on his great shoulders and his cap. Natalie looked at him, and laughed.

"Aha!" she cried, like a merry child. "Saint Christopher. He won't mind the snow, Saint Christopher!"

XXVII

SAINT CHRISTOPHER

Elinor looked up at Gilbert from her kneeling posture; their eyes met and gravely answered. Hers were black with anxiety; but even her attitude fell into relief because he had come. He took off his cap, and went up to the couch where Natalie lay regarding him still mirthfully. He spoke to her with a charming deference, like one essaying a game with a child.

"Natalie, I want you to come somewhere with me."

She shook her head.

"No!" she said, "no! no!" She sang the words in a pretty chanting, ending in a laugh.

"I tried to drive down," he explained to Elinor, in an undertone, "but there 's a tree fallen across the path. Cassie has gone back with the sleigh. Natalie!" his voice coaxed her, "now I want you to come with me."

But she was beginning, in a thin sweet little voice, the French song Lorraine had sung about the house. At the end of a line, she shuddered.

"No! no!" she said, "not that. We must n't sing that. They sing it — the other women. No! no!"

Elinor had risen to her feet, and now stood waiting. Horne gave her back her cloak, and then took a blanket from the pile where they had been left for use. He wrapped it about Natalie's shoulders, and lifted her in his arms.

"I 'm going to carry you, Natalie," he said. "You 'll let me carry you?"

She laughed. "Saint Christopher?" she asked delightedly.

"Yes, Saint Christopher! I am going to carry you home."

She gave a little cry, and pushed him with both her hands. The excess of her passion in answer to the familiar word struck out some sanity in her.

"No! no!" she cried, over and over. "I have gone away from that house. I have gone away from that room. I am going to live in the snow now — in the snow! in the snow!"

"You shall go to my house," answered Horne instantly. "You shall not go home."

"Saint Christopher! Saint Christopher!" she chanted, and her cheek fell happily upon his shoulder. He gathered her the better in his arms, and Elinor wrapped another blanket round her.

"Put out the light," he said.

She waited for him to cross the sill, and followed. He halted, and after she had closed the door, she stepped on before him with the lantern. Some hint of the woods, the storm and the night touched at the gate of Natalie's senses, and her talk was of the outer world.

"Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross!" she sang, and laughed in a merriment echoing strangely through the muffling of the snow.

Elinor walked rapidly even along the deepening footway, and securely because Horne was with her. When they came to the fallen tree, she stopped an instant to find the best way over it, and he too paused, to put his foot a moment on the log and rest from the strain of his carrying.

"Can you manage it, dear?" he asked. Even through the gravity of the hour his tenderness called upon her blood and steadied it.

"Yes," she answered gravely, and continued, feeding on the word he never knew he uttered.

"The partridges flutter in the snow," called Natalie. "It 's a pretty mark. They make it with their wings. Little tracks, too, all winter! There is n't any spring any more — nor summer. Summer 's dead and gone! dead and gone! It 's all snow now. He giveth snow, snow" —

They had finished the difficult way across the pasture, and found the road. Elinor walked almost lightly with relief. But when she would have turned at the gateway, Horne called to her, "Go on."

"On?"

"My house. I promised her."

She obeyed, and they took the driveway to his house, where lights were moving. Horne drew a great breath, as he went up the steps. Cassie had thrown open the front door, and stood there with a light.

"The chintz room! I 've made a fire," she said to him, and he went up the stairs, the two women following. The great chamber was bright with firelight, and the bed was ready. Cassie's nightgown was warming before the blaze. It was a pretty frilled thing made one winter when three of her mates were married, and delicate clothing was the substance of girlish talk. Horne went up to the couch, and put Natalie gently down on it. Her eyes had closed. The red was fainter in her cheeks. She seemed to be asleep.

"Are you all right?" he said to Elinor. She nodded, and gave him her snowy cloak to take downstairs. Then he went out, and the two women undressed Natalie, and got her into bed. Once while they were at work Elinor asked Cassie, with a sudden thought, —

"How did you know we should come here?"

"I thought maybe he would," said Cassie briefly.

Horne threw off his coat, and sat a moment in the dining-room to breathe again. His muscles trembled, and he was dripping from the task. But in a moment he got up and went into the kitchen. Old Sally was there over a roaring fire. A smell of herbs was in the air, and the kettles steamed. He was used to being understood in half speech.

"No doctor till morning, Sally," he said. "What you going to do?"

"Pack her round with water bottles. I 've got su'thin here to throw her into a sweat."

"She 's in a high fever now, poor child!"

"You let me alone!"

Horne waited in the hall. He saw old Sally go limping up the stairs with a steaming pitcher, and kettles of hot water. There was silence above, and after an hour she came down again.

"You better git the doctor by the early train," she said. "She 's terrible sick. It 's beyond me."

"Call John and tell him to go into the Mannerings' and telephone. I 'll write it out."

"There ain't no train till daylight," said Sally, but he cut her short and gave her the penciled message. It called Drummond by the early train. For himself, he dared not be away an instant, lest Elinor should summon him. Then he sat and reflected on the poverty of a house where everybody was well, and where there was no medical provision for fever or a sleepless night.

"Sally," he called again into the kitchen, "where did you put mother's medicines, when you cleaned the house?"

"Emptied 'em into the sink," said Sally, and took her way again upstairs with glass and spoon.

Meanwhile Natalie lay in her great bed and talked her heart out to the air. When they tried to give her the hot drink, she begged of them to make it cold, and once she cried out so piercingly that Horne came up and waited in the doorway. Her wandering gaze fell upon him.

"Saint Christopher!" she called, "Saint Christopher!" again delightedly, and Elinor's eyes, too, besought him. Cassie was at the foot of the bed, her hands folded, waiting. Her face was troubled. She felt sure old Sally was doing the wrong thing with her hot water and her herbs; but she did not know.

"Never mind, Sally," said Horne quietly. "Don't bother her. It is n't long till morning."

Sally withdrew, grumbling, and Horne took his place near Elinor where she stood, her hand on Natalie's. Sally went out of the room to heat more water, for nothing to her mind transcended a sweat; and Cassie with a comprehending look at the others slowly followed her.

"I don't know what to do," said Elinor. "There are no medicines."

"Has she taken anything?"

"Some milk. Some brandy. I thought she must have food."

"Let her be in peace, then. Drummond will be here at seven."

"It 's only a little after midnight."

"We 'll feed her every hour, till morning. Take out those water bags. Give her water, if she wants it. Don't burn her up."

"Will you stay? Sally overrides me."

"Yes, I 'll stay."

Elinor put the light behind a screen, and they sat down near the outer side of the bed and kept silence. The room was still, except for the whispering fire; and for the moment Elinor felt some security. But as she looked at Natalie, it departed from her. The thin face, in spite of the rose flush on it, looked sharp and alien, framed in its braids of shining hair. It was not Natalie, as she had seen her living about the house. It was like a poignant memory of her.

"Come into the orchard," said Natalie, in a clear, convincing tone. "It is all in bloom. The blooms are white. They were pink the year he lost Lorraine. He said so. 'The apple blossoms never were so pink as they are now,' he said. That was the year he lost Lorraine. We talked about her in the orchard. Her name is written on every tree. Would n't it be funny" — she laughed ecstatically — "if every bloom looked like Lorraine? He would n't like that. No, he would n't like it. That would hurt him. He never could go into the orchard then."

Elinor bent her face upon her hand.

"You must n't mind," said Gilbert softly. "It 's delirium. It is n't pain. She does n't know what she is saying."

The tears blinded her.

"I don't mind now," she said. "I mind all the years when this was coming. She may not know it now; but she knew then."

"Don't be sorry," said Gilbert, though his own eyes were wet.

"The first time he kissed me it was on my hair," said Natalie. "But we must n't tell those things. No! they are sacred. They must be hidden. We'll remember them when we have time, after he is really gone. Would it do any good to pray? What could we pray? We might ask God to give Lorraine a heart of flesh, not a heart of stone. It would be so simple then. Then we could say, 'God, give him Lorraine!' But she must not have a heart of stone. That would hurt him so. Think!" her voice fell into awe, "how dreadful it would be. He would put his dear head on her breast, and there would be a stone under it. The stone would hurt him. Can you pray?" she asked suddenly, turning to Elinor.

"Yes, sweetheart, yes! We'll all pray for anything you want."

"Pray for that one thing — a heart of flesh. Say it after me, 'God, let him have Lorraine!' Only He must remember too — there was something about a heart of flesh — a warm heart. I forget. God must do that, too. We must be careful; we must have warm hearts."

It seemed as if the night would never end, but as if they two must sit there forever hearing the innocent betrayal of a girl's unhappy life. They gave her drops of nourishment, and her delirium lasted in a fitful stream. It was the more awful because her fever did not seem to rise. She was even convincing in the speech that came concisely from her lips. She lay in absolute quiescence, with lax hands. Only her brain seemed to be alive, and to possess an awful power, as if it lingered in a dead body to give testimony before it, too, should depart. Cassie came softly up, and brought them food. The fragrance of the coffee had preceded her, and Horne was ready with a welcoming smile and a word "Good child!" Her hand trembled a little in giving him the cup, but she did her task seriously and then went away. There were deep things going on about her, Cassie knew. She was not curious; she was not surprised. She was trying to forget Cassie as a woman who hungered, and did wrong, and to take her innocent fill of service for Gilbert Horne, before the time should come when she must go out of his house and leave him there with Elinor. There was no pain in the thought, only a grave sorrow, and veneration for things that were somehow beyond what she could compass.

The early darkness thickened into the time when all the lamps of life burn low, and then there came the dawn. Natalie was silent, though her hands moved. Elinor went to the window, and drew the curtains softly. The wind had stilled, yet she expected to face the storm in a world where it seemed to be always snowing. But the first rays of light came from a blue sky to a shining earth. It was fair weather. She came back to her seat, and Gilbert saw that for some new reason she looked assured and strong.

"You can go now," she said. "It 's daylight. I am not afraid."

"I 'll start John off to the train. Are you dead tired?"

"I am not tired at all."

He had a look of grave tenderness that brought contentment to her face. Yet she knew such softness was in his nature for whatever suffered or bore a strain. It was for Natalie because she was maimed, for Cassie and her faithful service. It was the sunshine that makes all plants grow, and not the swift enfolding of any one of them. But it was sunlight, and very warm and beautiful.

As the clock struck seven, Drummond came up the stairs. Gilbert was behind him, and Cassie lingered outside the door like a statuesque messenger, ready to be sent on errands. Natalie's face, under the daylight, had more of its dreadful unfamiliarity. It was pinched about the nostrils, and the mouth, out of which strange sayings had come, wore the awful beauty of the dead. But her fever rose again, and flooded her face in triumph. She muttered to herself, and Drummond, after long scrutiny, turned to the others and asked incisive questions. When it came to the story of finding her in the house in the woods, he asked, "How long had she been there?" and Elinor remembered she did not know. Unless Natalie herself could sometime tell them, they would never know.

"Has she had any nervous shock?" he asked. "Any strain?"

"She has been under a strain for a long time," said Elinor.

He nodded.

"She has borne things," said Elinor. "She has kept still."

They stood aside, and left him to his communion with her state. Suddenly she opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Dick!" she said. "Is n't it wonderful!"

He took her hand in his.

"Yes, Natalie," he answered, in a smiling recourse to her name. "Dick."

"Paradise!" said Natalie, smiling at him, in a great content. "I was in an orchard all green, all over pink. And you came. So you came, Dick!" She made a little beckoning motion with her head and he put his face down to her. She whispered, "How did you get through the snow?"

"The snow is gone," said Drummond cheerfully. "It's springtime now. Take this, Natalie. Open your mouth. I'll put it on your tongue. Take it for Dick. There! now a swallow of water. That's a good Natalie!"

She shut her eyes again, and went murmuring off into strange byways of the sense, and Drummond got up, and, beckoning Horne, went with him from the room.

"Where's Dick?" he asked, outside the threshold.

"Somewhere in Canada."

"Oh, I know! Playing jigs!"

"Yes."

"Send for him."

"Is she in danger?"

Drummond was fractious, as a man who sees a problem before him and has breakfasted on a sandwich.

"Don't ask me that. You ought to know better, Horne. You send for Dick." On the way down stairs he repented of his humor, and stopped at the foot to add, "She 's used up, broken, shocked to death. I 'll go back at ten, and send you a nurse. But you ask that lovely woman to come down here, and I 'll give her orders to carry out till the nurse comes."

Gilbert went up and sent down Elinor.

XXVIII

IN THE EAST CHAMBER

THE nurse came that afternoon. She looked like a half-caste Juno and moved like Mercury. Elinor noted the calm sweep of her brow and the unfretted mouth, and took comfort in her, as a woman too absorbed in the case to be for a moment concerned with its human history. The impersonal atmosphere of systematic care fell upon the room; Natalie, lying there in silence now, was a patient, — nothing more. Elinor gave an account of her tendance up to the moment, and then went down to get her cloak. Horne came in at the front door. He looked worried, as if he had been on an unsuccessful quest. He glanced into the dining-room, and finding the table set for two, said persuasively, —

"Don't go over there to eat. Stay here with me."

She thanked him and demurred.

"I ought to go. I have n't seen Kate since yesterday."

"I have. She knows it all from Drummond, too. I told her you would eat with me. I want to talk to you."

She hung her cloak up again, and they went out to dinner. He drew her chair back, with a grave courtesy, and as she seated herself, it seemed to her that the act was something of a ceremonial. There was a conscious pause between them before he sat down in his own place, and Cassie brought the soup.

"Are you tired, Cassie?" asked Elinor, looking up at her with her inclusive smile. It was impossible, at that moment, not to connect Cassie with everything that might concern the house. Its intimacies seemed hers, she had tended it so long. Her service for it and its master, and her undying love, had given her rights.

"Oh, no!" said Cassie. "I 'm not tired." And having seen that the table was perfect at all points, she went out and left them to themselves.

Elinor sat in a maze, as if this were still a part of last night's mystery. It was quite unreal, yet it was like the coming true of many dreams born out of hungry fancy in those old Italian days. One thing was real. She was breaking bread with him at his own table. However briefly, she had come home at last.

"I've been telegraphing for Dick," said Horne, leaning back after his soup and drumming a nervous hand upon the cloth.

"Then you knew where to send?"

"I did n't know. I 've wired at random, asking him to answer. There is no answer."

"So he 's not found."

"He is not found."

"Does n't Kate know?"

"Nobody knows, since Toronto. It 's what Madam Walsingham said — a fool's errand. They are doing it as erratically as they planned it. I should n't wonder if the fit had seized Lorraine to go abroad, and they 'd all sailed from Montreal."

"You don't mean that?" It was a possibility beyond anything she had imagined.

"I mean anything. There's nothing too wild for her to do, and no path he won't take after her."

Cassie came in and brought their second course. When she had gone away again, Horne took up his meditating thread, as if he were beside himself and must be talking.

"He is a fool! a fool!"

"Your Richard?"

"Yes, he is a fool clear through. Can you fancy a fellow's having a devotion like that in his hand, and not knowing he had it?"

"He must have known she loved him?"

"He has known it for years. That's the trouble. It was too humble, too unassuming. It asked nothing for itself. He took it for granted. God! that such a fool could walk the earth!" He ate savagely, and though he talked, seemed not to notice her. Elinor understood that perfectly; she was only a part of his surroundings, the sympathetic medium that unloosed his tongue. She was, in some way, getting inside his mind without his knowing it. At once she had a boundless wish to stay there and explore. It was like entering a strange room and reading the inscriptions on the walls. She hardly knew herself in the grip of that temptation. It was like some mood of youth.

"He could n't force himself to love her." She seemed to be talking to a man in his sleep, and prompting him to avowals he might not even recall in waking.

"It was his business to love her," said Gilbert doggedly.

Remonstrant indignation woke in her.

"His business?" she flamed. "No woman wants a bargain."

"It was his business to see what kind of a devotion she was giving him, and treat it as if it were the most precious thing on earth. He 'd brought it to life in her. He 'd nursed it up and tended it. Then when it was full-grown — I can't talk about it. The chap 's a fool."

"Don't speak hardly of him. He 's got his blow to meet."

"Yes, she will die. I don't doubt it for a minute. Her life is sapped. She has nothing left to live on."

Elinor was silent, the warmth of personal feeling all gone out of her. His words voiced the inexorable prophecy at her heart. Natalie would die. They sat brooding a moment over their coffee, and again Horne seemed oblivious of her. He was looking out of the window where the day was dazzling in white splendor. He spoke absently, as if to the unseen judges of his life, —

"If anybody had cared about me like that — ever — if a woman had remembered me night and day, as Natalie has remembered him, I would have taught myself to worship her."

"Not if you did n't worship her by nature." Her silky voice broke harshly. "It 's nature. Nothing else. You can't build it up. You can't force it. If you did that, you would murder it."

He answered gravely.

"Yes, it's nature; but it 's something else, too. Don't you see what Natalie has done by this appalling faithfulness? She has laid bonds on him. She has bought him, at a price. He won't know it till too late; but she has built up something this solvent universe has got to honor. I 'm no better chap than Dick; but if a woman had done that for me, I would help her build. I 'd see what we two could make of it." His eyes had a misty look, like that of a man deep in some compelling dream.

"Would you?" asked Elinor, with a wistful tenderness. "Would you, Gilbert Horne?"

In his protesting passion he suddenly seemed young to her, a creature groping in new ways because, at the hour when life had called him first, he had not listened. His springtime had gone by; but here he was hearkening to the echo of songs now silent, and moved by faint rose odors from petals in a jar.

He shook his head impatiently, as if to dissipate the enfolding dream, and his gaze came back to her. This was the recognizing look of one who deals with fact. The smile she sometimes thought he kept for her alone came upon his face and warmed it.

"I have been talking nonsense," he said. "We 're all more or less crazy. It 's no wonder, after last night. And it does n't matter. Nothing matters till this thing has passed."

Some one came in at the front door. There was a step in the hall, and by one accord they rose to meet it. All their senses were on edge with expectation of some news from Dick. But it was Katharine; and Horne, after a word or two, went away to the barn and left the two women together. Katharine was pale. She, too, had been keeping vigil.

"I was coming," began Elinor.

"Don't go yet. Stay here and talk a little before I see her. I must see Natalie."

They went into the library and sat down, hand in hand, on the long couch between the windows.

"How is the captain?" asked Elinor.

"He is palsied, Nell. He can't speak. Yet I don't believe he suffers. But Brice — he is beside himself."

"Poor fellow!"

"There is no hope for his father; but Brice won't give up. He acts as if it were the acute illness of a younger man. He begs Doctor Drummond to save him. He keeps saying to me, 'I can't live without my father.' But Natalie? Tell me, Nell."

"Natalie is very sick."

"Gilbert Horne has told me how you found her. He said I must n't talk about it while you were so tired. Nell, did I do it? I told her Brice had lost her money. Did that turn her brain?"

"I don't know what turned it at the last. But it was no sudden thing, Kate. Natalie has been worn out for a long time."

"But she was calm, Nell, always calm. When I used to rage within me, I would look at Natalie and think how calm she was."

"I don't believe Natalie was ever calm."

"She was, Nell, she was! She was always pottering round doing little things, watering her plants, putting on new dresses for Dick. She never seemed to have many interests, but they were tiny interests, like a child's. I must see her. I can't believe this hideous thing unless I see her."

As they rose from their place, Horne drove by the window. He was going to telegraph again for Dick. They stole softly up the stairs, where the babble of Natalie's voice had begun again, and was going on unceasingly. The nurse turned at the rustle of their gowns, holding up a hand. Then she came out to them and, after brief questioning and answers, went to her dinner. When she had gone, they stole in and stood by the bedside. Elinor was amazed at the grief in Katharine's face. Katharine was not the woman for tears; yet tears were there. The sight of Natalie had touched some chord in her, unused to thrilling. Maternity spoke loudly, and moved her to bewildered listening. Natalie was in her twenties; yet, lying there, she looked pathetically young. Her beautiful hair still framed her face, from which the lines of pain were smoothed away. Her small hands lay outside the coverlet in supine laxity, palms upward, the fingers curled like petals.

"He will not come back!" she called suddenly, in such a clear insistence that the two women started. "There is a dark country. Lorraine will lead him into the dark country. If it were light there, he might go. There were two sisters, and one had everything. She had little feet, and a red mouth, and Dick loved her. The other had nothing but pretty hair — yes, she had pretty hair. He seemed to love her for a little while. A little while — and then there were years and years and no more love. 'Oh, for the wings of a dove'" — she sang it in her thin sweet voice, and, reaching for a note, she stopped upon it and began again. That happened over and over, until she fell into one of her long silences. When she began afresh, it was with a convincing reasonableness. "To be alone for years and years and years! It is a great world, and one girl alone in it! And so many stars, and one girl on every star! There has been pain enough

— and lonesomeness. God! there has been pain enough!"

Elinor had walked to the window, and stood there looking out on the splendid day. Katharine came to her in a moment, and looked out also, breathing hard.

"I can't listen to her," said Elinor. "I can't let anybody listen. It is horrible. It is indecent. It is as if her poor soul lay there naked, and we saw it."

"Nell," Katharine spoke in a rapid undertone. "I never knew her. I lived with her all those years and never knew her. Little Natalie! I thought of her as little Natalie, when I thought at all. But I never thought about her much."

"When you go down, tell the nurse to take a walk, a nap, anything. I 'll stay here. This may pass. I can't have that stranger in the room."

"He ought to know," said Katharine, while the voice rose again in supplication for the wings of a dove.

"Dick? he will, if Gilbert Horne can find him."

"He must know soon. She must be saved." But as she said it, the same words from other lips came to her memory. "Poor Brice!" she added. "That 's what he says about his father. 'He must be saved!' But Natalie! She shall not slip away from us like this. We must save Natalie."

XXIX

THE STARS

KATHARINE was by the fire alone that night, resting for an hour and thinking of Natalie. The girl's trouble had opened a door, and through that the woman saw sights amazing to her. Rather it opened many doors. There was the way of love: for now that Natalie was going on this mysterious journey, she seemed to have been very sweet in her unregarded life, like a part of the day's comfort we grow used to and never consider until it is lost. Katharine had a great desire to pluck the child back from this clouded path. She had remorseful pain because she had not seen which way things were tending, and like all her griefs, this was tempestuous. Her sorrows were always personal. They rocked the universe because she had made herself the centre. She judged all life in reference to her own, and when the great scheme failed to fit her small desires, she raged against it. But now at last she had been torn out of her own battleground to a solitude where another soul had fought in silence, and fervor flamed up in her to join that losing battle. At moments she felt as if she might wrestle with the powers of death for Natalie, and then the picture of the child, quiescent there, brought sad denial. Her own great strength stood up and laughed at her, like Hercules refusing tasks. Death seemed already to have sent his messenger. The potentate must have his will. If she should struggle with him, Natalie, between them, would be the sooner broken. Life smote her with its call to action. She had learned the lesson of haste: to deal justly and do tenderly toward what we love, lest it slip into some of the hidden ways of being, and be lost.

Cassie was at the library door. She had come in through the kitchen and stood waiting, her red shawl fallen from her head and her hair blown a little by the wind. A subdued serenity lay upon her and haste also: the haste to set her feet in appointed paths and do service while she might.

"I thought I'd go up and sit a spell with old Mr. Mannering," she explained. "I could spare a couple of hours."

"How is she, Cassie?"

"Just the same. Doctor Drummond's come."

"What does he say?"

"Nothing. He sits and watches her."

"Will Miss Thayer stay?"

"I guess so. Natalie's got hold of her hand." Cassie had always followed decorous custom in her country speech; but now the barriers had broken down. The sick girl was just Natalie.

"If you will stay awhile!" said Katharine gratefully. "Ask Mr. Mannering to let you."

Presently he came, and in that time she had prepared herself to meet him understandingly. The physical antagonisms of life had loosed their old imperious grip. He was a man in trouble, sharing, somehow, because it was trouble, the pain that touched her when she thought of Natalie. When he came in, she rose and piled the pillows for him, as she had seen him do it for himself.

"Lie down, Brice," she said gently. "Get a little nap."

But he came forward to the fire, and took his father's chair. He put his hands upon it as if they caressed it, and his eyes were wet. These hours of watching had undone him. He had shrunken; his face had faded into a soft, unhealthy pallor. There were new lines in it, and the eyes, ministrants of meanings he never had, had taken on a most appealing misery.

"Drummond has got to do something for my father," he began.

"Your father is an old man, Brice." She spoke kindly, to lead him toward sharp certainties with as little pain as might be. "Think how old he is!"

"What 's that for a man of his physique? He 's got five good years before him, if he 's taken care of. Five? Yes, ten! Drummond won't do anything. That 's where it lies."

"Perhaps it 's better not to fret your father. He is quite comfortable. He has no pain. If he could slip away like this" —

"He need n't slip away at all," said Mannering sharply. "Drummond has got to try something different. Why don't they use electricity? stimulants? There must be something. It stands to reason. Drummond thinks he 's an old man. He thinks it won't pay. That 's the trouble."

"You have been very faithful to your father." She was seeking at random for some friendly word.

He answered eagerly.

"We must take care of him, Katie, you and I. We won't let anybody come near him. I don't mind Cassie. He 's used to her. My father shan't wake up and find a stranger standing over him."

"We 'll do all we can, Brice." She was wondering whether he even remembered the scene before his father's illness, and whether the old man, hearing the strife below stairs and sharing the tension of the moment, had been stricken sooner. Brice had never told her. But he spoke now as if he might be answering that unspoken query.

"It 's strange how some things happen."

"Yes."

"Strange how this happened!"

"Tell me how it was, Brice."

"I had been talking to him, that 's all; and then I found him. But it 's the whole business that 's mysterious. Now look at father! The wish of his life was about to be fulfilled. We were going abroad, passages engaged, business all settled. But it was n't to be."

Her heart beat fast with the desire to spur him on to full betrayal. To her bewildered fancy it seemed, as it often had when they came to open issue, that what had gone before had no more meaning than if he had erased it from his brain. On that night of disaster, they had reached the very whirlwind of passion, and now he was dribbling on about the cause of it as if nothing but serene weather lay behind.

"Where had you planned to go, Brice?" she ventured. "To Greece?"

"Yes. We had n't much time to talk the trip over, but I meant to take a courier. There was money enough. Poor father! — money enough, but there might as well not be, for all the good it will do him."

Katharine picked up a fallen brand with the tongs, and settled it, using an elaborate care. Her face was flaming, partly with curiosity, and partly shame at her own determination to know him now entirely. In her softened mood, with sickness here and death waiting outside the door, she was prepared to be a lenient judge. Some unspoken mandate bade her even consider whether she must not endure existence with him again because she had once accepted it. But she would know the man before she took his hand and set her pace to his. There should be no more accusations and satirical portraits done to feed her scorn. Before they tried again to live a life together, she must see what manner of thing he intended it to be. Her gaze was on the fire when she spoke again. Though he was to be condemned out of his own mouth, she would not surprise the involuntary betrayal of his face.

"How long did you mean to stay abroad?" she asked.

He listened a moment to Cassie's step in the room above. Then, as it ceased, he answered easily, as if the matter were quite simple to him, —

"It would have depended on father. I was prepared not to come back at all."

"You thought he would prefer to live there?"

"Yes. He had a kind of a weakness for Greece, you know, antiquities, that sort of thing. Father was a great classical scholar. He knew the whole thing from beginning to end — mythology and all — old stories, you know, gods and goddesses."

She looked at him sharply. The inflections were so like his father's, in the same form of words, that she half expected to see him thirty years older, his beard silvered and senility fallen upon him. But Brice was shaking his head sadly, and looking into the flames.

"You said you meant to leave Willard in charge of the business," she continued.

"Yes, trusty boy! You could always depend on Willard. He was to send me funds, as the accounts came in. Well! well! It's over now. Poor father!"

There was silence between them until Katharine spoke again. A sharp meaning stirred her voice, yet it startled her alone.

"Brice, has anybody told you Natalie is sick?"

But he was musing into the fire. He looked like the captain in one of his lethargies.

"Natalie? What 's the matter with Natalie?"

"She has had a good deal of fever." It was not possible to tell him more. "I think she is in danger."

"She 'd better be moved up into the third story. I can't have them disturbing father."

"She 's over at Gilbert Horne's. She will stay there."

"You 're a good girl, Kate," he said, warming to her. "You fixed that up to save my father."

"Brice, she is in danger. She may die."

"No, she 'll pull through. She 's young," he said absently. "It 's the old that have got to go." There was a bitterness of envy in his tone. It seemed as if he would have warmed his father's blood by draining

Natalie's. "I'll tell you what it is, Katie," he said at length, "there 's no such thing as looking ahead in this world. You want something when you 're young, and talk and think and plan — and when you get it you can't enjoy it. Poor father!"

Again he dropped off into musing, and then recalled himself, staring his eyes awake.

"My father was a great classical scholar," he repeated, with a pride inflated since he used the words before. He seemed to be delivering a panegyric to ears prepared for credulous hearing. "We were very united in our tastes. We read together, constantly. His mind was in the past. If he had written down some of the things he used to say, the world would have recognized him. But Drummond will do something more than he has done, or he 'll hear from me." Moved by the sharpness of that conclusion, he rose, stretched himself and turned to go upstairs. "I believe I'll send Cassie home," he said. "Drummond will be in. I want to be there myself. Will you come up, along in the night?"

"I'll come at twelve," said Katharine.

When he was gone she rose, and stood over the fire for a moment of self-communion. It occurred to her again, as it had of late, that she might not have found in any vivid nature the surprises which awaited her in his. When she tried to understand his acceptance of the present moment without reference to the past or future, her intelligence stopped short. Certain distinctions were probably not to be expected of him, for they did not exist. She glanced at the darkened windows, and then, because her soul fought within her and air was more desirable than sleep, she got her cloak and went out into the driveway and down the road. The night was thick with stars. Logging teams had ground the roadway into a shining track. Katharine continued down the hill, not fast as she had sometimes fled, stung by her thoughts, but slowly, now and then stopping to look up and regard the greater worlds above. She had at that instant some new comprehension of Horne's meaning when he told her once that the night was his real daytime. Not an imaginative woman, her feet were constrained to walk upon the earth, to fall into error there, byways of doubt and misbelief. But it came upon her overwhelmingly as old truth does sometimes, like a new avowal, that the earth is not all. This was no vision of a waiting heaven. It was the certainty of many heavens in immensity of space. By day, in her usual habitudes, hot blood and robust health had kept her thoughts on Katharine Mannering. Now Katharine Mannering had dwindled to an atom. What she desired made no more impression on the universe than a wandering breeze. Suddenly there came to her a moment's remembrance of the constraining of beautiful souls: how they work their will upon the universe since they desire the right. She thought of Elinor with a yearning love, because she was gentle and seemed not to seek things for herself alone, and of Natalie, and sobbed out there in the darkness because Natalie had loved much and demanded nothing. The heaviest fetters seemed like gossamer, because the greater life, the life of all men and all women, might bind her to the wearing of them. She turned back homeward, and still kept stopping to look at the stars, beseeching them, in her heart, not to let her forget nor to disobey this one great moment in the rush of little ones. There was no definite decision in her mind. She did not swear to keep her oath to Brice; but she did homage to the oath that comes with birth into a mortal world — the vow that makes us faithful. Little things looked very near and tender to her. She had pity for Brice because he seemed to suffer so; though old disbelief translated his pain into that dual egotism born of his life with his father and called filial love. Yet here she checked herself. How should she guess what complexion that love wore in Brice, whom she had never known at all, save in his outward habit?

Returning, she did not stop at her own gate, but kept on, through Horne's driveway, to get news of Natalie. But when she reached the steps she paused there at the sight of Gilbert Horne sitting by his table, alone and idle. Yet no man ever looked less unoccupied, though his hands and eyes were still. His face was set in the stern lines of one who grapples with great questions. Was he thinking of Natalie and the present hour? or did his mind travel long roads toward his own past and the ways that led him to this time? She turned away, abashed at her espial, somehow forbidden to rouse him from that deep communion. Nor could she even hear of Natalie. The sight of him had suddenly recalled her from heavenly mandates and a mystic peace. She went home, her heart beating fast and her soul refusing to think on what must forever be denied her, but for which she would not cease to cry until small obediences had wrought out great renunciations. She looked up at the stars again before the door closed behind her, and they had not, even to her blurred vision, changed. They required something of her, irrespective of the way her blood ran or her pulses beat. Of her, a mortal, they demanded immortality.

XXX

THE MESSENGER

NOBODY but Brice thought much about the old captain, lying inert above, save with a moderate concern: for Natalie was dying. Drummond was there, and Elinor, with him at the bedside, knew he had formed his verdict, though he would not give it. Gilbert Horne, pacing back and forth in his library, knew, and so did Cassie, going on swift errands, and Katharine, waiting outside the chamber door. It was amazing that one who had roused so little interest while she lived should have caused a tempest at her going. The fever had left her. She spoke no more, nor did her eyelids lift at all, even when the nurse moved her slightly, or Elinor put a hand over the slender one lying outside the sheet. Elinor found herself thinking wild thoughts that swept her brain and were away again before they could be recognized or judged. The memory of Natalie's eyes held her hurrying fancy. They had been dark with fever; but now with white lids over them and lashes resting in a penciled line, they were, like invisible witnesses, the more terrible. She dreaded lest the lids should rise and the pupils front them all in accusation. For Natalie, drifting somewhere out beyond their reach, seemed to accuse not them perhaps, but earth, mortality, for leaving her so long untended. The life that stirred in her was very small. Her breath flickered, and Drummond, his mouth a savage line, fed her with stimulants by drops and looked at nobody. To that grim conclave between him and death, even the nurse was not admitted.

The evening wore on to eleven, and Gilbert Horne, still by himself downstairs, except at the moments when Cassie stole in to give him the last news, began to dread the morning, that ebbing time when the souls of men are stronger than their bodies, and it is easier to slip away. He was not fanciful, but he had certain fears connected with this illness. All but one had been fulfilled, and that last spectre he awaited: Natalie would die before the dawn. He went to the window and put aside the curtain. It was dark, and he cursed himself for the womanish fancy that the child must not be wafted out into a night like this. There was a step without. It hurried on the walk and took the veranda at a stride. The front door flung open, and Gilbert, at the sound, went into the hall to say there must be no noise. There was Dick. He was haggard and, in spite of the cold, ashen to his lips. He was overspread with the pallor born of fright, like a man come through great haste or danger. He stood there, not taking off his coat or hat, as if he must hasten further.

"I went over there first," he said. "The house seemed empty. Are they here?"

"Take off your coat, boy," said Gilbert gently, temporizing.

Dick mechanically took off his hat, and stood with it in his hand, awaiting orders.

"Gil," he said, "where's Natalie?"

Gilbert laid hold of his coat and began to pull it off. Dick submitted, but when he had shaken himself free, he said savagely,

"Why don't you tell me? Where is Natalie?"

"Old man, Natalie 's been sick."

"Been sick? I knew it."

"You got my messages?" Gilbert was conscious of the futility of his phrases, spoken only to gain time.

"I got no messages. I came because — Gil, she 's been calling me. We were in western New York. I came as fast as I could." He sank into the hall chair, and stared before him. He looked like a man who had neither eaten nor slept. Presently he glanced up with a smile upon his ashen lips.

"Well," he said, "why don't you tell me when she died?"

"Died? She is n't dead."

He came to his feet.

"Where is she?"

"Here, Dick. In the east room. Don't hope for anything! Dick, it 's almost over!"

Dick was halfway up the stairs, and the words followed him. They had a cruel emphasis, set there to make him stay. But he went on as if he had not heard, and Gilbert was behind. When he reached the door, there was Katharine. She stretched out a hand to hold him, but he did not see it. He was in the room, and Elinor, looking up, thought, "Here is Hercules come to help." But she knew it was in vain.

Dick halted a step from the bedside, and Drummond shook his head with the absorption of the officer in command; but Dick, not minding him, stepped past him, and, kneeling, put his hand on Natalie's. He gathered it up into his own, as if, warming it, he would warm her body also, and Drummond, since he was there, moved a little and accepted him. Gilbert Horne brought a chair for Katharine, and she sat there in the hall window and waited, while he sat at the other end of the table, waiting also. They were like mute mourners. With their bowed heads they looked acquiescent, and Elinor, with a sudden rising of the heart now that Dick had come, wondered why they should submit. Why was not all the spiritual force in this little company spending itself to keep her here, instead of saying farewell with dignity? Reading Dick's haggard face and the deadly will in it, she realized that he was fighting as Drummond had fought, and set her own soul to stand beside them. Natalie's sleeve had fallen back a little, and bared the delicate wrist. Dick put his other hand upon it, and once he laid his cheek there. But he gave that over, and fixed his eyes upon the lowered lids. They were all wrong about him, those who saw him. It was neither grief nor fear of losing her that seamed his face into a mask they hardly knew. It was immutable resolve. His young beauty had passed by; he was a man of strength, filled with the force that goes to battles and world-conquering. The man in him was broad awake, and the man was fighting. A thousand memories they never knew arose like warriors and made his army. She had laid bonds upon him indeed, as Gilbert Horne had said, in her long love. There had been an ineffable welding of the spirit, and he, now he was come, knew he had some power over her and forbade her soul to go alone. At least he might detain her for an hour.

"Stay a little!" his heart implored her. "Stay a little!"

The time went on to midnight, and then crept. Gilbert took out his watch and waited for the hours he dreaded. Then, as if it urged the hand to note it, he put his watch back into his pocket, and denied himself the knowledge. Three or four times Katharine went in and begged Elinor, by noiseless invitation, to go out and let her place be taken. But Elinor would not. She looked as stern as the two men. Her face had settled into lines, austere and lovely.

The dim hours of morning came and silently stole by. Gilbert felt them go like foes withdrawing for another onslaught. Dick, as if impatience overcame him, laid his lips upon Natalie's palm. Even so, he seemed to breathe life into her. Drummond, worn with the night, looked up, when some one carried out the lamp because daylight had come; he shook his head, bewildered, as if in his vigil on that dark battle-ground, he had forgotten day. The cold dawn brightened. It was in every thought, in a different fashion, that her going was not to be quite yet, and that they might disperse briefly, to rest their anxious minds, when a shaft of light struck the white mantel, and lay there trembling. Elinor regarded it with that incredulity we give the beauties of the world when they are no longer significant, save to hurt the heart. A breath recalled her. It was from Dick. He was looking at Natalie, his face ablaze with hope and wonder, and Natalie's eyes were open. They rested absently upon the shaft of light. It was that strangest gaze in life, the look that comes before the leaving of it. The eyes were not like Natalie's, with colored beams and all the wonder of the yellow iris. They were dark; the fixity of their gaze held solemn awe. There was great silence in the room. It had seemed before as if they were all still, but now Elinor felt the beating of her heart, and choked under it. The next instant even Drummond started slightly, and then held up his hand for silence. Dick had spoken.

"Natalie!" he said softly, near her cheek. "Look at me, Natalie!"

A little flutter touched her eyelids. Her gaze relaxed. He put his hand to her cheek and moved her head on the pillow so that his face might fill her vision. They were fronting each other, their eyes looking deep, pupil within pupil; and his breath was on her cheek. Another ripple passed over her face. Elinor, her thoughts on Dick, was marveling at the change in him. He had schooled his face into hope, because those other eyes, with their awed gaze, demanded something human of him. His mouth smiled, his eyes had pleasant lights in them. Yet they were commanding, too, as if he still called Natalie's soul and bade it stay. Drummond seemed to hold his breath, and a slow red crept into his face. He was a scientist, but he did not forswear uncomprehended ways. In his mind nothing was too intangible a help toward keeping warmth in stricken bodies; he reverenced the weaving of a cobweb, if it would hold. Something crept into Natalie's look and stirred the surface of it, as a pool is stirred.

"Natalie!" said Dick again, as if he called her back to pleasant tasks. "Look at me, dear! look at me!"

A movement flickered over her whole face. It gained no color, yet for the moment it lost austerity and grew human: strangely young, too, like a child's. Drummond had his finger on her pulse, and Dick still held her gaze. His face grew tense and white. The man in him was dominating the woman as it lived in her. All the fibres in him were commanding her, and yet with tenderness. He said her name again, and she seemed to listen wonderingly. To Elinor, watching, Natalie was a part of him, a creature over whom he had some power of life and death. He murmured other words to her, so simple that no one remembered afterwards what they were — words that were the recall of the beloved to homely deeds. Then the gaze between them seemed to break, with the quiver of her lids.

"Oh!" she breathed in a satisfied way, and her eyelids closed again. She relaxed, as if she snuggled into warmth and great content; and when Dick moved his hand to show her he was there, the fingers clung a little. She knew.

XXXI

SENSE AND SPIRIT

THEY tried to draw her back to life by threads of care and tenderness. The nurse served her in foolish ways not nominated in the bond; and Natalie smiled, ate when she was told, and lay for hours with eyelids closed and her hands dropped as if they had abandoned care. Of Elinor she seemed to have a little need, and Dick she regarded solemnly, as if he had been granted to her until some trying time should pass. Gilbert, looking at Dick, studied his changed face and the new aspect of him shown in silent moods and curt replies. For even now that the current of hope was strong, Dick was as unlike the man they knew as he had been that night when he came, in haste, upon her summons. Save with Natalie, he was very serious. The lines cut into his face stayed there. Gilbert wondered if Drummond could have told him evil news.

One night when Horne was settled by his fire, book in hand for the first time since the alarm and rout of illness, the new peace of the house fell upon him and would be manifest. The place had fallen into its accustomed ways. Old Sally stayed in the kitchen like a soul condemned to total banishment, and rioted in broths for the sick girl, and pretty concoctions for the table to hearten the well. The nurse, Sally regarded with a deep but civil scorn. A cap and apron were, to her mind, the folderol made to cover boastfulness in a profession to which you were called or not, as it happened. But since life interested her more than criticism, she was civil. Cassie was everywhere, swift-footed and silent, and Elinor stayed near Natalie, not to talk, for Natalie had no answers, but to help her live. It was all beautiful to Horne, in a way he did not formulate. It only seemed to him that Natalie was going to get well; and as we do when people are rendered back to us, he felt a strong desire to give her better tendance.

There was a rustle on the stairs and in the hall.

"Is it you?" he called.

"Yes," said Elinor.

He laid down his book and went to meet her. She was putting on her cloak, and he stayed her hand.

"You don't need to go," he said. "Do they want you over there?"

"No, I fancy not. But I 'm going. Natalie slept last night."

"Come in and talk a little."

She put back her cloak on the nail, and he followed her into the library. There he drew forward a great carved chair out of the shadows where it stayed in dignity because he liked his old worn workfellow better. Elinor sat down, and looked at him with her sweet expectancy. She wore a soft red dress that warmed her cheeks to a reflected rose, and she came from mothering Natalie with the air of it about her.

"You are different somehow," said Horne wonderingly. "I know. It 's the dress. I 've always seen you in black or white."

"Yes. I've been wearing black. Not mourning, because my father did n't wish it. But I put on this to please Natalie."

"Queer, is n't it, how everything all at once revolves round Natalie?"

"Yes. She almost slipped away without our knowing."

"And Dick does n't know now."

"Know what?"

"What we do. All those things she told and we listened to. He is the one person who ought to know them, and he never will."

"I hope he never will," said Elinor. She was looking dreamily into the fire, and the light of it played on her red dress, on her delicate hands and the bracelet she wore.

"How queer you are! Why do you hope so? She has lived out a long tragedy for him, and you don't want him to know it!"

"No, I don't want her to be indebted to remorse, or pity, or any lesser thing. I want him to love her because he loves her — no other reason. That's what Natalie would wish."

Gilbert put that saying by to reflect upon when he had more time; but this was a passing moment, and must be used in the warm flush of it.

"I have been sitting here planning how I might make it easier for them," he said. "If they want to marry, they could live on here with me."

Elinor looked at him in a frank denial.

"Don't do it, Mr. Horne," she said, "don't do it. Don't let him marry her because it is made easy. I know Natalie now. She shan't live on expedients.

She shall have him because he adores her and has fought his way to her, — not because somebody thrust her into his arms."

Gilbert smiled at her in a friendly way. It meant indulgence of a mood he might not share. Yet he spoke almost tenderly, —

"What a romantic lady!"

Her face warmed with something deeper than the fire-shine.

"You may call it what you like," she answered, "but that child up there is a sacred thing to me. From these few days, we know what the years have been. She loved him and then, as she thought, she lost him. She has not grown bitter or complained. She has just lain down and died. That's all. She shan't have happiness bought for her. She shall wait for something better."

"I don't know you in this mood. You are as warlike as Katharine Mannering. What do you mean by something better than happiness?"

Elinor, though she answered, scarcely seemed to include him in her thoughts.

"It is a very good thing to marry a man, to have tables and chairs and things you can put your hands on; but there's something else. It's not to be despised."

"What? Tell me what?"

"To love him in absence, if he does n't want you. Women are n't so unfortunate, if they have to do that. It's better than a makeshift."

He got up and walked to the window. Then he came back again, his face suffused not so much with color as with emotion.

"You make me see" — he began — "Pshaw! You make me afraid there are things I can't see at all. This has been a damnable time to live through. It 's not only because it 's Dick and Natalie; but they make me feel so infernally young!"

"Young?"

"Yes. All this pother has dragged up something in me that was dead. I hope it is n't going to live again. I 've envied Dick. I 've been sitting here by myself to-night wondering what it is in a man that makes a woman care for him like that."

"Has Cassie thought of marrying?"

He looked up bewildered.

"Cassie?" he repeated. "No, Cassie would n't marry. There 's a big blacksmith down across the Ridge. He wants her, but Cassie runs out at the front door when he comes in at the back. She 's like a big boy. She would n't care for men."

"She is a beautiful woman."

"Cassie 's a good child." He dismissed her from his thought, and Elinor, at last, bade her a mute God-speed.

"I used to wonder," said Gilbert musingly, "why the books gave so many pages to sheer love story. I see now. That child Natalie again! If she had died, one such death would have been as poignant as the slaughter of an army." He kicked at a log and sent up showers of sparks. "Some of us don't half live," he said savagely. "We don't live at all."

Elinor rose, looking at him frankly.

"Good-night!" said she.

"You are not going?"

"Yes. I must find Kate."

"This is the end of it, then. I shan't know you are about the house. I shan't hear you talking" — he spoke with entire simplicity.

"Oh yes! I shall be here a lot, till Natalie goes home."

As they stood there lingering by the fire, both outside themselves in an incomprehensible way, a strange thing happened to Gilbert; it was of the sort that sometimes made him feel as if in the midst of sane living, he was mad. And yet what other people call sanity always returned upon him, and he had learned to accept these changes as some journey of the soul, concurrent with great nature, and as simple as the paths we take unthinkingly. The walls about him grew impalpable, and he saw the bigness of things without, and felt the earth as he did in his nightly trysts with her, sweeping under him, not on a rolling course, but a track that took her somewhere. The night was the playground of his soul. All certainties came to him then, all obediences that were greater than hopes. The man within him, he who had lived more lives and different lives than the outer man, spoke in spite of him, —

"You belong here. You must not go away."

Elinor looked at him, her eyes dark, her delicate nostrils trembling. She could meet him by instinct, even when there was no possibility of understanding. There was no challenge he could offer and she refuse.

"You belong to me," he said.

"I know I do" — but the words failed her. He took her hand and lifted it to his lips with a courtier's reverence. He might have been his dead and gone ancestor who lived now in the silhouette on the wall.

"Stay with me!" he said. There was an alluring sweetness in his tone. All sad denials merged in an enchanting acquiescence. But she caught her breath, and withdrew her hand.

"No, Gilbert," she said with great gentleness. "No, dear, no!"

"Why not?"

"You only want me sometimes. You don't want me every day."

He shook his head as if he drove away bewildering dreams; but the dream stayed with him, and out of that he answered: —

"I cared about you, years ago. Did you care then?"

"Yes, I cared." She stepped back to her chair and sat down in it because she found herself trembling, and the moment made demands on her to talk and then be done. She thought she understood him; but it was plain that she, too, must be heard. He took the other chair, and leaning forward, looked at her with blurred, desiring eyes. Elinor held her hands locked together and kept down her trembling.

"Did you care about me all those years?" he asked.

The wish came upon her to speak, to justify her life as she had known it, in its silence and restraints. This was something she had not told even her own heart for years, until a girl's reticence had grown into a woman's passion, and she had accepted within herself a lonely destiny.

"I cared all those years," she said quietly. "I have cared for nothing else, except as I forced myself. I have built my life on that. When my father took me to Italy, there were years when I expected you to come. I don't know how, because things kept you here; but I expected you. Then I found you were not coming. I gave you up. But there was something inside me that would never really let me give you up. I said I would be obedient to things. I said I would live without you; but I sent you messages. I lived with you in my thoughts. I built a house in my soul, and there you and I lived together. I tried to be faithful to things because you were faithful. When I saw nuns and holy people, I said: 'I, too, am consecrated, set apart from the uses of life because I have taken a vow. I have vowed myself to him.'" She was using that simplicity of diction which seems remarkable only because we do not hear it every day.

"And I never knew it!" said Gilbert. "I knew some of it. I got your messages. There were nights — I'll tell you sometime. But now you have come back. You'll live with me now, dear. We'll talk of these things then. There will be so much time." It was an awed and happy voice. The dream was like certainty, yet it seemed incredible.

"No," said Elinor gently, "no, dear, I shan't do that."

"Not after this? You have told me things. You can't repudiate them."

"I don't want to repudiate them. I want to remember them, and I want you to. They will keep you from thinking nobody has cared for you. I'm glad you know it now. Glad! glad!"

He leaned forward and stretched out his hands for hers. But she denied them.

"You must n't give me a thing and take it back," he said, in a low tone.

But she still withheld her hands, and he looked at her speculatively with the challenge of the man for his mate. It shook her, but she spoke defiantly. The moment had changed her, as if a thousand breezes had blown upon her, and made her another kind of woman. The red was in her cheeks. Her mouth lost its delicate curve and showed the fullness of pleasure. In her eyes was the joy of life.

"I love you too much, too much, Gilbert Horne," she said, in a voice not like her own. The struggle of two natures spoke in it; this was the everlasting fight between the spirit and the sense.

"Too much, my girl? You can't love me too much."

They were like combatants. The more he stormed her citadel, the more her mind refused him. She spoke passionately, —

"Do you suppose I would take anything less than what I give you?"

"You will have all there is."

"Are you sure? I know! I know! It 's no other woman; but you have accepted life without me. You were comfortable; you told me so. You were happy — you told me that. You wished for nothing. But I wished for you. I adored you. All those years I wished for you."

"God, Elinor! can't you take me, then?" His face was white. His eyes blazed. In his first youth she had never seen him so compelling. Time had been kind to him. It had softened in him some of the greed of life, and this emotion was chiefly of the spirit.

"No, I can't take you. We can't take each other. Those things — that one thing — it means more than that."

"You want me to promise you devotion. I promise it."

"I want you to promise me nothing. You don't understand. You can't. If you had loved me" — she stopped in an irrepressible emotion.

"What is this but loving you?" he cried, in something as harsh as anger. "I want you. In every way I want you. Another man can have his wife. Why not I? I 'm not worth it. I know that. But if you care — you say you care" — His breath labored upon the word, and he stopped.

A smile came over her face, and, with the softness of two tears, made it ineffable.

"Gilbert Horne," she said, "you want me to-night. You don't want me every day."

"Not every day like this. But life is not all like this. There are days and days."

"Yes, there are days when you would hear the call of your old solitary habits, and I should seem a stranger in your house. In all these years you have learned to live without me, and I have not learned to live without you. Not in the same way, I mean. If we were together — I might care too much."

"I don't care enough, then?" he said slowly. "Is that it?"

"You don't care at all, in the way I call caring."

"Why do I want you, then?"

She flushed more deeply, as if she were ashamed.

"There are several reasons," she said. "You are soft-hearted over Natalie. That made you see love —

like a vision. It made you envious. You felt unrestful, young. It is a mood. It is seeing a picture and wanting to keep it."

"I shall keep it," said Gilbert briefly.

"No, Gilbert, no! the picture 's going home."

She rose, but he did not follow her lead, and as there was slight space between his chair and the table, she waited.

"How does a man persuade a woman?" said Gilbert Horne. "How do folks do their courting?" He seemed to be speaking to the fire, and still she waited.

"Sit down, dear. One minute. Please sit down."

She obeyed him.

"You said there were years over there in Italy when you thought I would come. Suppose I had come?"

She did not answer, but a spark showed in her eyes; it sprang from new knowledge of what that old joy would have been.

"Suppose I had," he insisted, "would you have run away with me?"

"I don't know." That was her first evasion. She did know.

"Your father was incurably ill."

"Yes."

"My mother thought she was going crazy."

"Yes."

"Could we have bent those two to what we wanted?"

"I don't know."

"But if I had come, if I had asked you — Elinor, answer me!"

She spoke the truth now, with an adorable simplicity.

"I should have expected you to tell me."

He drew a deeper breath.

"Yet," he said, "you don't expect it now. I tell you and you don't believe me."

"Ah! we are grown up. Then I accepted things. Now I hold them off and look at them."

"And they don't pass muster?"

"Then" — she hesitated.

"Well?"

"Then I should have believed you loved me. Now — truly I must go."

"What do you mean to do next year?" he asked half absently. The blurred look had gone from his eyes. He no longer moved like a man in a dream. Rather, the trees in the forest might have told her, like the man who prowled there on winter days, seeking out little tracks in the snow.

"I am going to live in town. Katharine will be there, and Natalie."

"You are not going back to Italy?" He breathed his satisfaction, and she added, in a quick withdrawal:

"I think not. At least not yet."

"No, not yet!" He stood aside to let her pass, but at the door she turned. The red of battle was still in her cheeks. She looked larger with the bloom of life upon her.

"We won't remember this," she said. "I shall come over in the morning to see Natalie. I shan't keep away from you, and things won't be different between us because we 've had intemperate talk. Good-night."

She went swiftly out, and he did not follow her. Instead he stood there on the hearth and tried to beckon back his dream. But it would not come. The delight of imagined possession was afar, and a new constraining lay upon him. There were many things he thought about himself, things she had begun to understand and that hurt her in the learning. If he bound her to him with the long vow of flesh and spirit, there would be hours when he cried for escape to his old solitary life. Yet he adored her, while he was afraid. The fear was the world-old instinct of the creature hunted by ties and social ceremonies. But a something dutiful in him and keen as the elemental impulse that bade him flee, spoke sweetly in the tones that women use to call their best-beloved. It charged him to remember how he had been given back the dream of his youth, ineffably glorified under the crown of middle life. He was on the threshold of a mystery. Other men might know how to deserve such things without a pang. He could only try to take them humbly and in awe.

XXXII

THE DARK PLACE

THE next morning Elinor went over, shortly after breakfast, to see Natalie. She and Gilbert met in the hall, and hardly looked at each other. There was defense, withdrawal, in their very atmosphere. They were like two familiar friends who, at the moment, have no time for speech. The brightness of the morning was in Elinor's face: the coolness, too. She looked as if a west wind had passed over her and swept even her lesser thoughts into new harmony.

Natalie was alone in the sunny room, propped on pillows, the frilling of her night-gown low about her fair young neck. The nurse, with a crafty eye for color, had laid a blue wrapper down beside her; but her hair was the only brightness the child herself could show. It was braided in two braids that held her like a burnished frame, and the long, loose ends curled richly. Her eyes still had their solemn look of illness. They were fixed on far-away things, save when some one briefly recalled them. For Natalie, merely because her blood had started, had not come back. Her body had its rational life; but the soul was somehow lacking. At the sight of Elinor, her gaze quickened. Elinor had come to the bedside and laid a rose down near one little hand.

"Katharine sent it," she said. "It 's from the rosebush in your room. Katharine is watering your plants. She wants me to tell you that 's all she can do for you now — till you come home."

A wondering look crept into the girl's eyes. She had been cold so long, and now the world about her seemed to be quite warm. She felt it, but it did not move her; she had not the strength to care.

"She is very good," she said dutifully. "Katharine is very kind."

"It is n't that, sweetheart. It 's because she misses you. She wants you there."

Elinor moved about the room then and pretended to do things, though no one could better its fine order, and presently Dick came in. After a word or two with her, he went up to the bed and kissed Natalie's hands. Elinor retired to the west chamber, where she lingered with a book; and Dick drew his chair to the bedside. Natalie was looking at him with a wistful curiosity. He detected this in her often and, only half understanding it, yet longed to sweep it away by some wholesome wind.

"That omnipotent nurse has gone to town," said he.

"Don't call her names. She 's kind."

"Yes, that 's all very well for you. She treats us like the dirt under her feet. May we come in to see you? 'No, not for an hour.' May you be read to? 'Not yet.' May you come out snow-shoeing? 'No.'"

Things she had been brooding over since her mind began its groping, beset her now.

"Dick," she said, "how did she dance?"

"Lorraine? Beautifully. She got some notices in Toronto and Montreal." He answered with great frankness, as if Lorraine might be a delightful subject of talk between them. "Then she made up her mind Canada was no good — the little places — and she cut for western New York. I left her in Rochester."

"Why did you leave her?" Natalie had never questioned him in all her life; but now she felt detached from ordinary ways. Expediences had fallen from her.

He hesitated a moment. Over and over he had been warned by daily implication and the doctor's fiat, not to excite her. Yet Dick felt through the illumination of this time of terror that he knew some things about Natalie which no others knew. Still, this might not be the moment for saying them to her.

"She danced beautifully," he went on. "And grannie sat in front and looked like a picture. If you 're ever jealous of me, Natalie, it will be grannie. I love her."

His fencing did no good. She had the air of listening to him, and yet of hearing only such words as fitted her unspoken thought.

"Did Levinski come?" she asked.

"Levinski? No; he is in Poland or somewhere."

"Did he cable for her?"

"Bless you, no!"

"Then why did you come home?"

"How you do pester! You 're not Natalie. You are Paulina Pry."

A little red had stolen into her cheeks. She looked willful, and seeing that, he relied upon his old knowledge of her, even against medical tradition. He held her hand and stroked it in a sober way, and his tone was quite unmoved.

"You must n't get me into trouble, Natalie. If you do, they won't let me see you. If I tell you things, will you be a good child — quiet and all that? Not let them find me out?"

She nodded.

"We were in Rochester," he said, still quietly, though the frown deepened in his forehead. "We were to wait three days, while Lorraine rested and made up her mind about giving an evening there. One night I woke as suddenly as if some one had touched me. I heard you calling me." He told it as if it were a simple commonplace, but Natalie's eyes darkened and her lips parted with her quickened breath.

"I did n't know I called," she said.

"Yes, you called. Now don't get eager over a thing like that. That was n't anything very wonderful. How often you 've called me and I 've answered, or known you 've called and been too lazy! It is n't anything, for people like you and me. It would be queer if you could n't summon me." He had laid his will upon her, as upon himself. He meant to tell the story, and yet keep her calm. She hardly stirred now, held by the witchery of it and by his dominion.

"That was at eleven," said Dick, as if he recalled it all quite slowly. "I bore it until four. Then I got up and dressed and put my things together. I could n't ask to see Lorraine; so I wrote a note to be given her in the morning. I told her I would come back if I found you well. She has behaved beautifully about it. I got a letter yesterday. She went on to New York, to stay there and decide what to do next."

"Then Mr. Horne did n't telegraph you?"

"Yes, at random. I never got it."

"Why did n't you telegraph instead of coming?"

He looked confused. Then he laughed.

"Natalie," he said, "I 'm ashamed of my hysterics. That was my first thought — to wire you — but I could n't do it. I had to come. Nothing else would do. I was so sure you wanted me, I was afraid of telegrams."

"What were you afraid of?"

"I was afraid" — he stopped, and she finished for him, in a quiet certainty, —

"You thought I might be dead."

He did not answer, but his face assented for him.

"There 's only one thing more," he said, in a moment. "That I 'm going to tell you, because it 's all so queer. It 'll only take a minute. Then I shall go away, and you must have grog or something. When I was going downstairs to pay my bill and take my train, I stopped outside Lorraine's door. I thought if she were awake I ought to tell her, and not sneak off like that. But there was n't a sound. Then I listened at grannie's. I heard her cough. It was a wide-awake cough. I knocked softly. She called 'Come in.' I opened the door a crack, and said, 'It 's Dick.' 'Come in,' she said, as if she 'd been expecting me. There she sat in bed, her old face all swathed round in lace, clouds of it. She looked like a strange kind of spirit. I told her about your calling me. It seemed a perfectly natural thing to tell her. 'I knew it,' she said.

'I 've been dreaming of ghosts all night long. I mean the dead and gone, as if they were alive. And I 've been wading in snow. That 's a sign. That 's trouble for us.' Then I said, 'Good-by, grannie. I 've got to catch my train.' And then" — his eyes blurred, but he spoke composedly, — "then she put her little hands on each side of my face, and pulled me down to her and kissed me — one cheek and then the other. Just as you have sometimes, Natalie. And she said, 'Yes, dear child! that 's the thing to do. Go to her as fast as ever you can. God bless you!'"

Natalie looked as if she were not so much excited as bathed in wonder. He sat there a moment watching her, and then he put his lips to her palm.

"That 's all," he said, "except that there was a wrecked freight, and that delayed me. I 'm going now. Don't you get up a temperature or anything. They must n't find us out. They won't let us play together."

Natalie's forenoon went on like all her days now in a sweet security. Elinor was there, in and out, not to talk, but to keep life astir about her, so that the room should not lose cheerfulness. What Natalie thought, in those hours of strange communion, no one knew. Only she spoke very little, and they still had the uneasy feeling that she was not quite recalled. In a long silence of the afternoon when the nurse had come back and was busy in the kitchen accepting posset from old Sally and setting it forth in the exquisiteness of fine damask and a flowered bowl, Gilbert Horne appeared in the open chamber door, and stood there smiling. Natalie smiled back; her face wakened. He was thinking that she had not seen him since her unrecognizing eyes included him in the house in the woods when she had said "Saint Christopher!" But now she looked calmly welcoming.

"Come in," she said. He came and took the chair beside her bed, and for a moment held her hand. Fear was at his heart. They had got back some shadowy semblance of her. Would it ever be the old enduring Natalie, she who seemed to have in her frail body the strength of ten?

"Well, Natalie?" he said gently. He looked so big and dear that her heart melted to him. His was an impersonal kindness. She could not admit even Dick to the intimacies of her sick mind, because he might be hurt; but here was a man who seemed always to represent the well-wishing of the world. He was near, and yet too far from her to feel her pain.

"Well, Natalie?" he said again.

She regarded him with far-seeing eyes.

"I have been," said she, "in a dark place."

"Yes, child. I know it. But that's all over now."

She was silent a moment. Then she said, —

"I may go there again."

Gilbert considered within himself, and meanwhile he held her gaze. She looked imploring, almost terrified.

"Natalie," he said, "listen to me. You need never go there again. We shall try to keep you; but that won't do any good unless you keep yourself."

"But the dark place is always there!"

"Yes, it is always there. But do you know what life is? It is knowing the dark place is there, and keeping away from it."

"It is horrible," she said, with a shudder, "horrible!"

"No, child, nothing is horrible that was so created. Some things are not our business. The dark place is one. You must simply keep away from it." But he held her hand while he spoke and looked kindly at her, and when he went away she lay and pondered on his words, and after that she was a little different. She was calling on her will and humbly on something higher than her will, to keep her away from the dark place.

That night when the house was asleep, Dick roamed into the library, and there he found his uncle sitting by the fire, without book or pen.

"What do you think you 're doing, old man?" asked Dick.

Gilbert relaxed into a whimsical smile before he answered, —

"Keeping vigil."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know how long I shall live as I have been living. I thought I 'd be saying good-by to myself."

Dick stared.

"You never seem to sleep now," he said.

"No. I feel like Madam Walsingham. Life is shortening up. I 've got to stay awake and get my fill."

"Madam Walsingham! there 's an old woman for you! Gilbert, what was the matter with Natalie?"

Gilbert answered glibly, telling the truth while he could, not knowing how soon he might begin to hedge.

"Drummond says she had a nervous shock."

"What caused it?"

He began slowly, as if he were giving evidence.

"I believe she had been unhappy for a very long time."

"Why?"

"Ask her, Dick. Ask yourself. It's not my business."

Dick stood with his hands in his pockets, staring into the fire. The frown was deep in his brow. Gilbert, watching him, suddenly realized that he looked like a good deal of a man, and resolved that if he wanted the truth he should have it. But Dick forsook that trail. Possibly he guessed where it might lead him.

"But a shock is n't the same as a long unhappiness," he said. "What do you mean? What does Drummond mean?"

Gilbert Horne reached out for a clear statement, and accomplished it.

"Natalie," he said, "wanted to put her money into Fiske and Bailey, to buy them out for you."

"I knew that. I refused it."

"Well, she tried to do it in spite of you. She found out suddenly that Fiske and Bailey had already sold out, that Mannering had been playing her fast and loose about it, and that incidentally he had embezzled her money."

"Mannering? The devil!"

Gilbert went on piecing together the fragments of that night as he had them, though he knew nothing after the old captain had been taken ill. How long Natalie had been away from home, why she had taken to the house in the woods, he did not know. No one would ever know. Dick asked him a series of short, sharp questions about Mannering's stewardship, ending with the defective metaphor, —

"Have you punched the old windbag's head for him?"

"Not yet. I am waiting for the captain to die."

"He won't die for years."

"Oh yes, he will! He 's got to. Things must be simplified."

Dick had another stretch of silence, and after that he spoke half to himself, and musingly, —

"So she has not been happy!"

Gilbert said nothing, and Dick stared at the fire for a time. Then he broke out suddenly.

"The only thing is for us to be married at once."

Gilbert thought of Elinor, and triumphed mildly, picturing her approval. Dick turned upon him.

"You don't believe in me, old Gil," he said impetuously. "You think because I 've let things go to the dogs, I can't whistle them back again."

Gilbert sat balancing a paper-knife upon his finger. He seemed to be weighing the merits of the case between the man and woman.

"I 'll tell you what I do think," he said, at last. "If you 're still hankering after Lorraine, you 've got to say so now to Natalie."

"Lorraine? Bother Lorraine!"

"That 's not pretty."

"No, it 's not. Lorraine 's a wonder. But she 's no more — hang it, Gil, I don't want her! I could n't get her, if I did; but I don't want her."

"You want to moon over her a little. You want to think you might have had her."

"Not now, man, not now! I 've spent a good deal of time with her this winter. I 've plucked out the heart of Lorraine's mystery. She did n't have any."

"Who helped you cut your eye-teeth, young one?" asked Gilbert, looking at him with affectionate eyes, where a smile lingered. Dick broke into a laugh.

"Yes, it was," he said. "It was partly Madam Walsingham. But it 's more than that. Frankly, Gil, I got a good deal of a scare about Natalie. Things have been — different." His eyes took on the introspective look they had worn since he came back. In a moment he turned on Gilbert with his old boyish honesty.

"Don't you be afraid, old man," he said. "I won't make the same blunder twice."

He sat down and they reflected a little, each on his own road. When Gilbert spoke at last, it was in a way that fell in with their musings.

"I fancy, Dick," he said hesitatingly, as if he schooled himself while he taught the other man, "we don't quite know how to make them happy."

"Whom?"

"Women. They are such delicate things. They endure so much, but it 's easy for them to be broken. I fancy we 've got to mull over it, and study it — how to make them happy."

"Have we, old Gil?"

"It 's not enough to be loyal. We 've got to seem so. We must save their pride. I fancy they 've a lot of pride."

Dick frowned at the fire, and did not answer. Gilbert spoke again, feeling his way with difficulty among his own uncertain thoughts.

"They demand something of us, a kind of strength, a sort of courage. We have n't got it — actually, I suppose. We 've got to seem to have it."

"Play to the gallery?"

"No! no! Do the things that demand courage as if we had it. Do the things, Dick, do them, while the gunpowder's running out at the heels of our boots."

XXXIII

LOVE DENIED

WHILE Natalie lay there and looked at the sunshine on the wall, the early spring came with great suddenness and power. There was the sound of trickling drops and rushing water. The snow melted under a flood of sun from fervid skies. Great banks of it still remained, water-soaked and gray; but it went on melting, and the streams from it formed on Edgcombe Hill and swept down headlong into the lower lands.

Dick stood at the open door and let the spring wind blow upon him. The air was moist, and birds were in the garden shrubs. From the field across the hollow, he thought he heard a jay. All the atoms of the world were in motion. The earth called him, as it had over and over in other springs; but he stood there and faced her and denied. His years of wandering were over. All the strength in him and all the hot blood were in use now to fetter his feet to one spot, and bind him on the wheel of chosen destiny. The world, as the world, was enchanting to him; but one thing in it was his own. That was Natalie whom he had almost lost. Fear was still regnant in him; it always would be.

He closed the door, and ran upstairs to her. The nurse was at church, and she sat alone by her window in a low chair. She wore a blue dress, the Madonna's color, and her hair, still in its long braids, made her younger than her years. She was lying idly back, her eyes on the maples over the hill, not yet budded into red. Dick had been gently protective of her through her sickness, the love in him in abeyance. Now he shut the door behind him, and went toward her quickly. She turned with a slow, welcoming smile; but he knelt beside her and drew her into his arms. He laid his face to hers.

"Natalie," he whispered, "love me! love me!"

There was brief silence between them, and then she put her hand up to his cheek, and stroked it softly.

"Dear old Dick!" she said. "Dear old boy!" The words hurt like a denial. He drew quickly back, and looked at her. The color scarcely tinged her cheeks. An ineffable tenderness dwelt in her eyes, but that was all. The old quick answer, the passionate haste to reassure him, had belonged, it seemed, to another sort of creature. This was Natalie, yet not herself. It was a gentle changeling. The fear of losing her swept into the kindred fear of finding her estranged.

"Don't you love me, dear?" he asked simply, and again she put her hand to his cheek.

"Oh yes!" she said. "Dear old Dick! of course I do."

"You are different, Natalie," he hesitated.

She looked distressed.

"I don't know what it is," she said. "No, I am not the same."

He took her hands, and stroked them with a gentle touch. The sorrow in his face moved her profoundly.

"You must n't mind, Dick," she said. "Go away, dear, and have some pleasure. Don't come out every night."

"I've got to, Natalie."

"Why?"

"I can't trust you now. You get sick and unhappy. I must be here and see to you."

"I shan't be sick again," she said musingly, "nor unhappy. No, I'm sure I never shall be unhappy any more." But that assurance was more terrifying than any fear. It seemed a certainty that she had outlived the real life in her. He made another trial, and asked her bluntly, —

"Will you marry me this spring?"

At that she drew away a little, with a swift uneasiness.

"No, Dick, no! We can't do that."

"Not this spring?"

"Not ever, Dick."

"Why not? Natalie, why not?"

She seemed to be thinking hard, but the only reason she had came haltingly.

"Dick, there's not enough of me."

"You'll be quite well in two weeks more."

"I shan't be the same. I can't tell you — yet I've got to tell you. It might as well be now." She left her hands in his and looked away from him out over Edgcombe Hill where the snow was melting fast. Her eyes had a solemn truth in them, and no fear, even of what she had to say. But, as he noted with an apprehension that grew as she went on, not a shade of her old changeful expression came to light her face. Her eyes traveled back and rested on him in great tenderness. "I don't know whether you can understand," she said. "I don't myself quite. Only I know it is so. Something has died out of me. I am not the same."

He laid her hands gently on her lap, and drew back a little.

"You mean," he said, "you are indifferent to me?"

She spoke with a quick anxiety, wistful lest he should be hurt.

"No! no! not indifferent. Never that."

"Is it dead and gone, Natalie?" His mouth quivered a little, but his voice rang well.

She looked at him seriously, and then smiled, to soften the words for him.

"It 's I, Dick. I am dead and gone. Something has died down in me."

He got up and walked away to the other window and stood there, hands in his pockets, looking at the teeming earth. It was still calling him, and he could answer. He could go now, and leave no agony behind. Then he went back and stood before her.

"People talk about broken hearts," he said slowly. "Do you suppose I broke your heart?"

She answered in a loving haste, —

"No, dear, no! It was n't you. It was I. I asked too much. And I can't find my heart now. That 's the trouble. I guess I ate it up too fast." She smiled at him, but there were no tears in her pathetic eyes. He remembered love had used to bring tears there.

"Don't you worry, Dick," she said affectionately. "Don't let it bother you."

"It 's got to bother me," he said soberly. "If I 've lost you, I 've got to bother. Do you suppose I can let you go and not — not suffer pain?"

A quick look flashed into her eyes, and made bewildering changes. Her face broke up in keen emotion.

"Don't tell me you care, Dick," she said sharply. "Don't tell me you would care!"

"Care for what, Natalie?"

"If we say it's over — if we part good friends."

His face dropped into the lines she had not noted there: the lines of grief. For the first time since she had loved him, the shadow of Lorraine was not between them.

"Natalie," he said slowly, "you must n't let yourself misunderstand. Whatever I am, I am yours; the little good there is in me because you created it, the bad — well, because it is. That's how it stands. You can't send me away without smashing things to pieces. Do you want to send me away?"

"It would be too terrible," she said to herself.

"What would be terrible?"

"Don't you see? For me to care and care, till there was n't anything left in me to care with, and then for you" — She paused, and the old look of apprehension touched her face. He saw it there, and instantly something sweet in him responded to it. He took her hands again and bent over them.

"Never mind, sweetheart," he said gently. "If one of us has got to suffer, let it be I. But we won't have suffering. We'll get well, and not think of these things any more."

Her face smoothed itself out, though she still looked at him in a wistful questioning.

"I can't have you troubled, Dick," she said. "I can bear anything but that. Go in town, dear. Have some fun."

He touched her hair, and smoothed it softly.

"No, sweetheart," said he, "I shan't go in town, except by day to earn some money. I hoped you 'd let me save it to buy bread and cheese for us. If you won't, you can have roses or pearls or something. But I shan't be far away from you."

He turned from her, and went rather blindly to the door. In the hall Cassie met him. Something had disturbed her steadfast look.

"Mrs. Mannering wants you," she said. "She 's in the library."

XXXIV

BETRAYAL

KATHARINE was pacing up and down with the unrestrained movement of a woman held in narrow bonds against her will. When Dick came in, she turned upon him, and he felt her challenge.

"The captain is worse," she said. Her voice rang clearly. It was hard, with the metallic resonance of bells.

"I 'll run over," he said quickly.

"No! no! Brice is with him. Wait!"

Dick stood by the table and pushed the books about, to give her time. Though she surprised him, he was not thinking very much about her, nor, indeed, of anything. He was conscious only of the bruised spot within him left there by Natalie. Meantime Katharine looked at him unseeingly, her own thoughts knocking too insistently at the door of speech. She moistened her dry lips, and pressed a hand upon them.

"It is very difficult," she said, at length.

"What is it you want, Mrs. Mannering?" asked Dick solicitously. "Tell me. I 'll do it for you."

"I came here to see Gilbert, but you will do as well. Better. You 'll act for Natalie."

His every-day sense came back. He straightened, and looked keenly at her.

"Yes," said he. "I 'll act for Natalie."

Gilbert's step sounded in the dining-room. "Call him," said Katharine.

But he was there, and when he had crossed the threshold Dick shut the door behind him. Both men faced Katharine, regarding her with an anxious expectation. With Gilbert's coming, her own pose had changed to one of great resolve and dignity.

"Doctor Drummond has been here," she began. "He says the captain may die at any time."

"Let me go over," offered Gilbert, in his turn.

"No! no! There is nothing to be done. But I must talk to you."

She passed her hand across her face, and seemed again to set her thoughts in order. Standing there immobile, she looked like a symbol of great strength, maimed somehow in the using. Her old revolt, her hot desires, were laid aside for an enduring calm. She was like a woman on her defense before two men who represented some tribunal: perhaps the voices of the world.

"I don't know how to say it," she began. "I don't know how to live now without shocking the accepted decencies. But when things are mean and poor, there seems to be nothing left us except to deal with them in mean, poor ways."

She clasped her hands before her, as if she would wring them; but they held each other still. Dick glanced involuntarily at Gilbert, seeming to beg from him some form of soothing. But Gilbert shook his head and waited. Katharine went on impatiently, scorning her own rebellious nerves. "You must both help me. It is not for me. I would n't ask that. It 's for Natalie. Dick, Natalie's money is all gone."

"I know," said Dick. His brow darkened.

"How did you know?"

"I told him," said Gilbert.

"Very well. Now this is what will happen. The captain is going to die. When he is gone, Brice will escape us. He will get away with all the money he can lay his hands on. He must not be allowed. I tell you he must not be allowed."

"It shall not be allowed," said Dick. "Don't bother, Mrs. Mannering. Don't torture yourself so."

"Then don't you see you must do something now, now while his father holds him here? He won't allow the captain to be troubled or disturbed. He is afraid of that. Hold him through his fear." A quiver moved her face.

"I suppose I ought to feel shame at betraying him," she added, in an inquiring wistfulness. "Perhaps that 's what I am feeling. It seems like shame. But it must be right to save Natalie's money. I can't help thinking that 's the most important thing."

"Sit down," said Gilbert gently. "We understand."

"No, you don't. You never in the world could understand how impossible it is to move among smeared, sticky things like these. But whatever it costs, Natalie shall be paid." She drew herself up and summoned a fictitious strength that looked like pride. "You don't know it all," she said, turning to Dick and pointedly including him. "He has made money on that book."

"'Hearts Inspired'? Yes, he made money."

"A part of the money is mine. The book was mine."

"Yours, Mrs. Mannering?"

"Mine. I wrote it."

"You wrote it?" Dick could only echo. She seemed to be insisting upon admission to a farcical atmosphere whither he had long ago consigned Brice Mannering.

"We don't need to go into these things," said Gilbert miserably. He had seen wood creatures in traps and let them out or brained them as their necessity required. It looked as if this one were determined to stay, letting the cold steel bite and cripple her.

"Don't forget the real state of things for a minute," she said, still to Dick. "Brice and I together have received money from that wretched book. We got the money by using Natalie's. And now Natalie must be made whole. If I could influence my husband myself, I should not ask you to do it. But if I enter into the question at all, it will put him on his guard and make him the more obstinate. So I betray him to you. He has betrayed Natalie. I betray him. And also myself. But that does n't count." She glanced about her for her cloak. Then she remembered that she had come over without it, and not looking at them again, turned toward the door. They made way for her deferentially, Dick conscious of longing to do something superlatively chivalrous, to soothe her wounded pride. At the door she paused. "Don't lose time," she said. "Don't lose a minute."

Presently they saw her walking down the drive, erect, bareheaded, as if she dared the blustering wind to buffet her.

"Jove!" said Dick. He strode to the fire and laid about him with the tongs, masking his own emotion.

"Did you know that?" he asked at length, half angrily.

"What?"

"Did you know she wrote that rotten book?"

"I don't know it now," said Gilbert roughly. "We neither of us know it."

"Of course! that's understood. Well, we've got to tackle Mannering. Can we do it?"

"We can scare him blue."

"He's a slippery beggar."

"He's a brainless one. He does n't know what you can do to him and what you can't. If I told him I could sentence him to solitary confinement in the house in the woods, he'd believe it. He does n't think — or remember — or draw conclusions."

Dick looked at him in wonder. Horne's tongue was used to temperate speech, but lately he had given it larger freedom. He seemed like a man bent on taking facts as they are, and twisting them into shape for handling.

All that day Brice stayed by his father, and Katharine was in and out of the room, watching them both with a varying mind, and saying to herself, from no especial interest or surprise, "I am a traitor."

At twilight, when Elinor was with the captain, Brice got his coat and went out for a sedate trot on the veranda. Katharine was below stairs, and she saw Gilbert and Dick striding across the orchard as if they had awaited him. Her heart quickened, but she felt only a tired regret for them all impartially, because the things to be done were difficult. The two men came up the steps, and held some low-toned talk with Mannering. Presently his voice rose in sharp appeal above their monotone. It held a sudden terror. "Don't disturb my father!"

Then they went down the steps together, and along the drive. A man was on either side of Brice. They seemed to be taking him away.

She ran upstairs and found Elinor bending over the captain, vainly trying to interpret the question in his eyes.

"Is it Brice?" asked Katharine, stooping over him in a kindly care. "Do you want Brice? He has gone to walk — with Gilbert Horne."

The seeking eyes seemed satisfied, and the old man fell into one of his sudden sleeps. Katharine smoothed the coverings, and presently she and Elinor moved to the window, and stood looking out along the path where the three men had gone. Elinor was tremulous under a disturbing prescience, as if her being stood on tiptoe at some potent summoning. Life called her, and she heard her own response. Outside there in the beautiful day was one who wanted her, and there were the paths where her feet ached to follow him. The two women seemed to have bartered natures, in swift interchange. Now, for the moment, Katharine was the grave, considering spirit. She was speaking soberly.

"I must be clumsy, Nell. I turn life into ironies. I've been contemptuous of Brice, and now I've got to be contemptuous of myself. I love courage, and I've used trickery. I want to do big things, and I've had to ask other people to do them for me. Now I have asked Gilbert Horne."

"He will do them," said Elinor. There were new vibrations in her voice. "Gilbert Horne will do them."

Katharine turned and looked at her.

"Nell!" she said, "why, Nell!"

Elinor felt the rush of swift desire to profess her faith in him, mingled with passion's longing to do him honor by owning her allegiance.

"I can't marry him," she said, in that same moving voice. "But I want to, Kate. I want to."

"I have been very dull," said Katharine slowly. "How strange it is!"

As it happens with creatures when the earth calls loudly, Elinor yielded to the great egotism of the soul and body burning under their own quickened being. She forgot Katharine's barren past, or that she had looked on springs from which she might not drink. Like a girl unused to life, she laid her cheek on Katharine's shoulder, whispering, —

"It has always been so, Kate, always."

A little shiver ran over Katharine's body, but she held her close.

"You must have him, Nell," said she. "Why should n't you?"

"No, Kate. But that can't alter it."

The captain stirred, and Katharine gently freed herself.

"I must go," she said. But she took Elinor back into her arms, and looked at her a moment strangely.

"Has he" — she paused. "Has he kissed you?"

"No — oh, no!"

"Then I'll wait. But bless you, Nell! God bless you!"

It was two hours before Mannering came back, and then Katharine was alone in the sick-room. He appeared there in his usual fashion, noiseless and in haste. Anxiety was on his face, but only for the captain: for it cleared straightway, seeing there had been no change. He nodded absently to Katharine, to release her, studied the medicine schedule with a sharpness he had never shown over his ledger, and then sat down, clasping the captain's hand. Katharine regarded them for a moment in fascinated wonder before she stole out, leaving them to their still communion. Through that one act of touch they seemed to be transfused into an uncanny oneness, beating sluggishly on into its own decay.

XXXV

A VOW RENEWED

The captain lay for days in a deep sleep that seemed to Katharine not so unlike the life he had been living for the last ten years; and then he died. It was she who closed his eyes, as one not serving him or even Brice, but learning the alphabet of service; and she, with Elinor, arranged the burial. She tried to feel some decent sorrow for an old bond broken; but her mind escaped to busy itself over the hours the Hornes had spent with Brice, in the library, these last days. From those long colloquies he had fled upstairs, heated and fretful. The contest had at least been on; the issue baffled her. But now Brice was absorbed in grief. He watched at night with his father's body, and by day sat over the library fire, as if loss had made him cold.

At the end of the third day the captain was buried, and they, man and wife, their occupation gone, came home together from the grave. Elinor had been over the house, darkened to a prescribed solemnity, and thrown it open to the light. It was cool weather, and fires were crackling; but everywhere there was the look and sound of spring. Some one had heard a robin, and Gilbert Horne that day had put the bluebird mark upon his calendar. After the silent dinner, Elinor went to her own room, and Katharine wandered about the house with an uneasy step that led her finally into the back yard where, in the cool earth, white violets would be budding soon. The moist wind washed her cheek from the house-feeling of close companionship. She put up her head like a wild thing and sniffed the air. The world was big about her, greatening under the soaking of past rains. It had infinite hope and abounding promise. Yet the life she had decreed herself was the life of the cell, and with the world calling her, she went in to Brice. She found him over the library fire in his sombre black, and with a face subdued to grief. He got up and gave her a chair. His father's stood untenanted, and as he passed it, he touched the arm of it in silent recognition.

"I mean to get my father a monument," he said abruptly, when Katharine had seated herself.

"I would, Brice."

"I shall have the inscription in Latin. My father was a distinguished scholar. He will be a great loss to the world."

"He will be a great loss to you, Brice," she ventured. It was impossible to say more.

He nodded solemnly.

"I shall carry out," he continued, "the purpose of his life."

She hesitated, and then, as he did not go on, she asked him haltingly, —

"Brice, what was — his purpose?"

But he did not resent the question. She was only a voice eliciting reply because it touched some spring in his absorbed imaginings.

"He was a great student. If he had gone to

Greece, he would have made explorations. I shall carry out his lifework for him."

"What can you do, Brice?"

"I shall get up an exploration fund. It will bear my father's name. He will be remembered with Schliemann — yes, with Schliemann."

"But there are other things. The business — Brice, I hate to bother you to-night."

"You 've been good to father, Katie," he said, from the absorption of his dream. "You took faithful care of him."

She got up hastily and went out on the veranda for an untroubled breath. Gilbert Horne was coming along the orchard path. She ran down to meet him and speak unheard.

"He is making plans," she said. Her face had the look of a despairing prisoner. "He wants money. He will get it somehow, anyhow. You can't prevent it."

He regarded her with his grave kindliness that always seemed well-wishing toward the many and not the one alone.

"I should have told you three days ago," he said. "Things are pretty well untangled. We have been working like beavers over them."

"Has he paid Natalie?" she asked breathlessly. "Did that wretched book coin money enough for that?"

"Not altogether. But he has made over an interest in the business. Natalie is a partner, and Dick will act for her."

She looked at him, wondering. In less than a week's time he had forced Brice into action, and she, in twenty years, had left him sluggish as she found him.

"How strange it is!" she said.

"Mannering has behaved very well. Better than we have, in fact. It was n't altogether a fair game. He agreed to some things while his mind was elsewhere. He even offered to sign papers without reading them."

She broke into a laugh. It seemed to mock herself as well as Mannering.

"So he was willing to sign papers without reading them!" she said. "It 's a queer world, — a queer world, Gilbert Horne!" Then she added abruptly, "You hold a mortgage on this house?"

"Yes," he said, as if he were ashamed of it.

"Are you coming out clear yourself?"

"Ultimately."

"I see. You think you are going to get something more out of the business. But you won't. He 'll muddle it up, in spite of you."

"No," said Horne gravely. "No, he won't muddle anything any more. He has gone out of the business for good. I have taken it over, and placed it in Dick's hands."

"What will he live on?"

"Dick?"

"No! no! Brice Mannering."

"I have made him" — again he hesitated — "a yearly allowance." These were the things he had not meant to tell.

"Out of what?"

"Out of the business. Dick has great faith in it. Dick 's keener than a brier."

"You mean out of your own pocket. Never mind, Gilbert Horne! You will have but one to feed. I shall work. I can support myself. Perhaps I can do more."

All the forces in her strained for action. If she could waste herself somehow for Brice, perhaps she might stay with him, as one not quite undone. Freedom had knocked at the door and gone away. She had but one prayer now: that her cell might not be dark. Horne put out his hand, and she gave him hers. The tears sprang hotly to her eyes. "You must despise us," she said, in a low tone. "You must despise us both."

He looked at her in real surprise, and for one of the few times since they had been neighbors, used her name.

"Despise you, Katharine? I don't know what you mean."

"His debts — what he has done. That book" — she added blindly. "But you don't know."

Horne regarded her seriously, and considered how she might be comforted.

"I know a lot of things I don't talk about," said he. "I know you 've got a hard row to hoe. I 've thought lately you meant to stick to it. I 'm inclined to be glad of that."

She lifted her face in recognition of a friendliness she could not accept in any but small measure. Her eyes were partly closed, and tears lay on her cheeks.

"I am going to stay," she said, almost in a whisper. "I made up my mind some time ago, when Natalie was sick."

"That 's good. It 's better. Perhaps it 's always better to stand by."

"You did it yourself. You 've been faithful."

He frowned the words away, as if they hurt.

"Don't tell me I 've been faithful," he said. "I did the things I saw. I did n't see everything."

"Never mind. You stood by. Sometimes I think that was why I could n't go. You would n't let me. When one person is faithful, it makes the rest of us ashamed. I shall stand by."

She wiped the tears from her face and winked her eyes free. But she did not look at Gilbert Horne. She moved away with a drooping obedience that was new in her. It did not seem like a pliant creature crushed, but only bent to inflexible uses.

Forgetting the neighborly call he meant to make, Gilbert turned homeward, and she went in and up the stairs to Elinor. She found her by the window, watching Gilbert, in what seemed a musing dream, along the orchard path. Elinor wore a white dress, all floating softness, and to Katharine's tired eyes she looked already like a bride. Katharine put her arms about her, and stood holding her lightly, as if, like a bride, she were not only dear but somehow sacred.

"Pretty Nell!" she said wistfully. "Pretty, young, sweet Nell!" There was a moving softness in the words, and Elinor knew what thought had brought it there. She could not answer in that vein, but she did say, —

"We must not be separated. Nothing shall come between us."

"What should separate us? Be happy, child!

Drink it down to the dregs. But there won't be any dregs. Drink it deep. They say happiness is n't good for us. They don't know. Let them starve a while, and they 'll sing a different song. Eat and drink, Nell, and live forever. Let me see one creature glad."

XXXVI

THE WAYS OF LIFE

Katharine had prepared herself for seeing life settle into its old channels, though without the captain. Brice, she judged, would go into town on his accustomed train, and though he had made over his dictatorship, sit about the office in pompous abdication. But the next forenoon she went into the library with her dusting cloth, and started back, a catch at her throat. There he was in his father's chair, the volume of Homer on his knee. It was the captain's attitude, though not the captain's air of somnolent well-being. Brice looked sad and lonesome, like a man bent on some purpose, even the quest of age in imitation of his one ideal. Katharine stood gazing at him, and the future unrolled before her, a vista with no brightness at the end. He would sit here and grow old. All the active impulses of being would die down in him, as he invited his decay. The slow paralysis of what should be power, the unreasoning acquiescence in the downfall of the flesh, struck upon her with horror, and she realized what the last battle of all must be, after the test of middle age. Even if it were met with honor, it meant, not the building of tissue, but its repairing; not the toughening of the body, but the strengthening of the spirit to a point where, when the flesh calls on it to yield, it answers, "I will not."

But Brice was refusing his battle. He was opening his gates and calling in the enemy. She saw herself beside him years from now, galvanizing his spirit, imploring it to fight away this daily death until the natural death, beloved and lovely, came to make all well. She thought with an absorbing wonder that this was a part of her bond: to watch the man she did not love and save him from his own decay. And strangely, though it meant the suffocation of her natural impulses, she had ceased to combat that. She was animated by one great emotion: the refusal to let life get the better of her. She came nearer him.

"Brice," she said, as if she called him to awaken, "Brice, are n't you going into town?"

He looked up indifferently, still holding the book, as if to return to it after this momentary interruption.

"I intend to keep up my father's studies," he said. "That is what he would have wished. We read together a great deal. I must not neglect my reading."

She hesitated near him.

"Can I do anything, Brice?" she asked vaguely. He closed the book with a reverent care, and laid it on the table. Then he answered, with some show of interest: —

"You might look over my clothes, Katie. The Cynthia sails next week. I 've telephoned for passage."

"The Cynthia? Are you going abroad?"

"Yes. I am going to Greece."

"I will look over the clothes," said Katharine.

She went out of the room abruptly and stood in the hall, her face pressed against Elinor's cloak, hanging there. It was friendly, and impersonal. Just then she could not touch a human hand because, in the prospect of Mannering's bidding her take passage with him, all intimacies were intolerable to her. She put on her hat and walked, fast and free, into the road and down to the house in the woods. The brown woodpath was dry, and the pine needles felt soft under her feet. A little mist of green was on the young trees in the clearing, and the air blew soft as June. She had never prized her home on Edgcombe Hill. She loved no place at all, save the great earth and the space to roam in it. Her own wild spirit was the one force in life to her, and carrying that, she took the universe with her. It was not the fear of leaving this ground that moved her now, but a dread of going away with Brice, of enduring his presence in the solitude of crowds, of ministering to him while he should grow old.

The house in the woods was open, door and windows. It seemed, as it always did in summer weather, like a part of the woods itself. The air played upon it as it did upon the tree trunks, and drew through it as it might through upper branches. Katharine went in and sat down on the couch, her elbows on her knees, her head drooping. There she stayed for hours, forgetting her body, suffering in a vigil of the spirit. Her soul was withdrawn into the last cave where desire meets the decree and strives to vanquish, only to retreat. Her vow seemed to her now austere as God. It loomed before her, terrible, and yet with the august kindliness of law fulfilled. She fought the situation with the logic of the heart. Was it right for her to follow the accidental impulses of his mind merely because she was his wife? At that moment it was impossible to tell. The insanity of renunciation was upon her. The hours went, and she had not decided. She was not at the luncheon table, but later she appeared, dark-eyed and pale, in Elinor's room.

"Have you had anything to eat?" Elinor said at once, putting her into a great chair.

"Yes; some bread and milk. I could n't come." She leaned back in the chair, and her mouth moved in lines of misery.

"Is Brice in the library?" she asked at length.

"Yes. I left him there."

"I 'm going down presently to get my sentence. He 's sailing, Nell, for Europe. I 'm afraid — I think he wants me to go with him."

The two women seemed to have changed places. Elinor, bathed in her own premonitions of happiness, leaped like light to the core of human relations, and judged them, as they were sound or rotten.

"Not with Brice!" she said.

"I don't know. I have not decided. I want to stand by."

"Not that way, Kate. Work for him, wish him well — but obey him? live with him? Kate, you hate him."

Katharine's mouth trembled. "No," she said, "no. I do wish him well. That is n't hate."

"But you abhor him. You must not go away with him."

Katharine rose and walked draggingly to the door.

"He must decide," she said. "He is the only one. He must decide."

Brice was on the veranda, pacing up and down with a slow step, his head bent forward as he meditated. This was the luxury of woe, yet it was honest. It was compelling, like some wholesale indulgence, and it bade fair to become a habit of old age. Katharine sat in the library and waited for him. At last he came, and she watched him dumbly while he moved his father's chair nearer the fire and sat down. Then he laid his hand upon the volume of Homer; but before he could lift it, she had cried out sharply to him, —

"Brice, listen to me!"

He looked at her indifferently.

"Will you tell me" — her stiff lips almost refused their office; but the question resolved itself into a cry, "Brice, it is n't right!"

"What is n't right?" he inquired, frowning a little.

Then she asked her question.

"Do you expect me to go abroad with you?"

The room was very still, and her mind followed the ticking of the clock in a rhythmic measure.

"Do you want to go?" he asked at length.

"I want to do" — she sought a homely ending to the phrase, and added, "what I must." But her heart kept beating out: "It is not right! It is not right!"

Brice, in his turn, considered. He was not used to generalizing even about the dear details of his own life; but he had begun to acquiesce in the prospect of any lot where he could be let alone. Throughout his father's illness she had been a deft-handed, silent servitor. Not once had she scourged him on to action or preferred her own wild claims. This morning he had felt very peaceful, alone with his book and his bodily ease; but now, recalled, it began to look as if that immunity could hardly last. Katharine was Katharine; when life settled again into its old channels, would she not play the whirlwind? But she was speaking with an agitated candor. Suddenly it seemed to her impossible to begin the new account unless she did it honestly.

"There are things I must tell you, Brice. I 've not been fair to you. I have talked to people. I have done things underhanded, in a way I despise most. I must tell you" —

"There! there!" said Mannering. He was frowning. Here, as he had expected, began new volumes of old talk. "Come, come, Katie, it 's a simple matter. I 'm going abroad. That 's all there is to it. Lots of men go abroad."

"Do you want me?" she asked tremulously.

A revulsion no less real than hers, though it was not so keen, came over Mannering. His was the unheralded reaction against great boredom.

"No," said he. "No. I don't want anybody. Please yourself, of course, please yourself; but I 've got things to attend to over there. I shall be occupied."

She got up from her chair, and stood there trembling. Her face flushed all over, and tears were in her eyes.

"Why, Katie, what 's the matter?" he queried kindly. "You look sixteen."

She laughed a little.

"You are very good, Brice," she answered humbly. "Of course you don't want me. How should you? But I did n't know. I was afraid" — It was dark before her eyes, and the room swayed a little. But she governed herself, and went over to the door. "I 'm going to look over your clothes," she added. "I 'll do all I can."

He had been regarding her half absently. Now he got up and spoke with a civility lamed by awkwardness, —

"I might as well tell you, Kate; I mean to live there."

"Do you, Brice?"

"I shan't come back. If you want to carry out some of your ideas, you can say I deserted you. Hang it all, Kate" — He looked an emotion she had never seen in him. "Do what you like. I shan't come back. You took good care of father."

He sought his chair in definite conclusion; but hot blood mounted in her, and she stayed to tell him, if she could, what he had done for her and what she in turn would do for him. There was a step without, and he spoke irritably.

"That 's Horne. Shut the door. I can't see him now."

She went out and closed the library door as Gilbert Horne came into the hall. She flashed on him a radiance to which he was a stranger. In spite of her ungoverned spirit, certain sides of her were a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. The Gilbert Horne she guessed at she had no communion with, save within her mind; nor did he half know her. She had locked her beauties all away from him.

"He is going abroad," she said hurriedly. "Brice is going. Alone! He does n't want me."

"I knew he was going," said Gilbert. "We 've been fixing up his credit."

"I shall go in town to-morrow, to look for work." She spoke as saints might speak of paradise.

He smiled at her.

"I 've been thinking about that. We wondered if you 'd like to go into the business. A sort of head clerk and secretary! You and Dick could pull together."

"I can do the typewriting," said Katharine. Her eyes had turned to black. "All the letters!"

"You can read manuscripts. They 've been piling in since 'Hearts Inspired.'"

The name threw her back upon herself. Her pleasure had a swift rebound.

"Are you going on printing that?" she asked. "Are you going on selling it?"

"It is for you to say."

"I say no, then. No! no!"

"That settles it."

She flushed all over her face, and Gilbert, disconcerted, said to himself, "This happy woman is going to cry." He hurried away from that dangerous possibility, asking, —

"Can I see Elinor?"

The love of life enkindled in her, if not for herself then for another.

"Don't see her here," she said; and added, as if she dared him to his wooing, "This house is gloomy. Take her to walk. I 'll call her." She ran up to Elinor's room, and burst in after her knock like a wind from heaven.

"Get your hat, Nell," she cried. "He wants you!"

Elinor turned from the glass, where she had been putting up her hair.

"Why, Kate!" It was all she could reply to such a vision. "Why, Kate!"

"I know. I must look crazy; I feel so. My blood 's afire. What do you think it is, Nell? It 's freedom, freedom!" She stretched her arms above her head, as if she offered adoration to the gods for not destroying her. She laughed, a little runnel of deep joy. "Go down to him, Nell. You 'll be sorry for me because I am alone. You need n't be. You 've got a man — God bless him! God bless you both! — but I 've got freedom and a chance to work!"

She wafted her out of the room on the wings of her own passion, and Elinor went amazedly as if it were all a dream that might be broken.

Gilbert was waiting in the open door.

"Come," said he. "We 'll go into the woods."

"No!" she said. "No!"

"Come, I want you."

Her woman 's instinct answered with obedience that outstripped her will. They walked across the pasture to the woods, she with her head bared to the warm spring weather.

"You know what I am going to say," he began, once in the shadowed path.

"Don't say it, Gilbert!"

"But you know?"

She did not answer. Out in this larger air, the sanities of life were calmly evident. This was a world beyond the subtleties of feminine revolt. She had denied him because his call to her had lacked some inner flame she was accustomed to call love. But what was love? Here was the man, a fact. She could not get away from him. Body and spirit she obeyed and answered him. That wordless speech, that fusion of desire that make the dual life divine were theirs, and not to be obedient was to mock God's mandate from the bush.

"There ought not to be anything to ask," said Horne, in a kind of anger against her soft unyieldingness. "You know how things are between us. They can't be played with. You care, as I care about you. There 's only one end for it. You 've got to marry me, and put up with me, and I 've got — my God! I 've got to bear the sweet bewilderment of it and keep sane and make you happy." He breathed hard and deep, and the world and the woman together moved in his blood. He looked at the trees, as if they would help him in their steadfastness. The riot and the motion of the spring were always more to him than the mere beauty of it. It seemed as if the universe pulsated with birth, the birth of beauty only, and as if all creatures had to share in that sweet trouble. So through the greatening of the year he walked always in a maze, and fought away its mastery because he longed for calm. And now with this spring came the woman also, and he had to meet the new obedience of his individual lot, and take strange ways with her. She hesitated in the woodpath, and he stopped beside her. She was quite pale. Joy was merged into the love that is unmindful whether it be glad or sorry. She looked at him, and grew forgetful of herself.

"I trouble you too much," she said.

"You trouble me infinitely. But it 's only because you are so far away. If you were in my house — if I saw you — Nell, you care about me."

"Do I, Gilbert Horne?"

"You care about me. I've got some power over you. This is n't all the fancy you carried away from that old love. It's I, you poor child, I! I've been watching you. I've seen you turn from a picture into a woman. You've got all the passions in you, acrid, sweet. I'm afraid of them, but I'm not going to be afraid. We'll live, Nell, live!"

No passions were in her then save an abiding steadfastness that paled her face and made it tremulous. But she could only say to him, —

"I'll be good, Gilbert. I'll be very good."

XXXVII

CASSIE

Brice went away on his journey quite composedly, like a guest taking leave. No wife ever did more fervent service than Katharine, in her remorseful haste to have him gone. She did his packing, and at luncheon stood beside his chair, to help him like a handmaid.

"You'll remember about the monument," he charged her.

"I'll remember, Brice. I'll do it just as you would wish."

"I left some flowers there yesterday. If you should think of flowers occasionally — but never mind. Only see they keep the grass cut, won't you, Kate?"

When he parted from her, it was as if he were merely going into town. He drove away, the volume of Homer in his bag; he might need the book on shipboard, so he said. Dick was with him, a compendium of cheerful talk. He would see Brice off at six.

Katharine and Elinor went into the house together. They hesitated at the library door, but that room seemed dedicated to Brice and his father. It was impossible to enter there with such rejoicing minds.

"Come upstairs," said Elinor.

"No, come outdoors. I want to walk."

They struck out over the fields where they had walked on the night of Elinor's coming. The spring world had changed in these last days of sudden heat. There was a sound of birds in the air, and the woods were tremulous under their foam of green. They climbed a knoll, and looked down into the fields beneath. The valley was enchanting, a village of clean white houses in a row. Little whiffs of blue were going up from fires not yet died down from dinner-time. Katharine looked about at the four quarters of the world as if she owned them. Her eyes widened and her nostrils trembled. But suddenly her gaze dropped again toward the valley where a moving line of smoke told where the train was running into town. Her gaze softened.

"I hope he 'll be happy, Nell," she said. "I hope he 'll take some comfort there."

"He will, I think. He 'll find a pleasant rut, and settle into it."

Again Katharine's eyes took on the look of larger life.

"I cannot imagine" — she began, and stopped. Then she spoke with quick abandon. "Let me tell the truth just once before I put these things away for good. I cannot imagine what life will be without him." To think of it even seemed a joy almost too keen; it hurt instead of healing.

"Don't think of it," said Elinor. "Don't dwell on it. Let the past go."

"I shan't dwell on it. I shan't even speak of it after to-day. But now, Nell, now! this is my first minute of freedom since I was a girl. If he were in town, he was coming back at night. If he were in the house and I out here, I was going back to him.

Nell, there is no gift in the power of Almighty God like that of freedom." She seemed to grow and tower, and Elinor so caught her mood that the wide fields, as she gazed at them, looked all too small for that consuming spirit. They stood in silence looking off to a higher slope where there were patches of new green, maples in soft array. A man's figure came out from the shadow of one grove and crossed the clearing to another. It was Gilbert Horne. He was climbing the farther hills, walking fast as if there were something in him to wear out. As Elinor watched him, her face grew mobile, and veiled itself in softer pink. She spoke on impulse.

"Look! He has freedom — now."

Katharine's gaze, too, melted to the tenderness of a woman who sees ineffable ways she may not enter.

"Ah," she said, "that 's different! You won't hamper him, Nell. You won't clog him. You 'll let him be a wild man when he wants to, and you 'll sit at home to wait."

"Yes," said Elinor softly, "I shall."

"You 'll tame him, too. He won't want to roam. Nell, don't you see?" There was a quick excitement in her voice. She turned upon the other woman in a flashing confidence. "Love is a wildness of itself, a freedom. It has its own paths. People don't see that. If they did" —

"Tell me," said Elinor, in a low tone, "tell me all you think."

Katharine seemed to be absorbed into the larger life of things. She felt the world as it is, with strange pulsings in it, sidetracks of withdrawal, and yet moving perpetually within the orbits of the law.

She spoke like a prophetess intrusted with a message not her own.

"I know love, because I know sexual hatred. I can see what marriage ought to be, because I lived in chains. It is a great bondage, a great vow, a great abnegation. If they try to live together every instant, they 'll pay for it. It 's frank companionship and sudden worship. It is terrible — yet — O Nell! Nell! you happy, happy child!"

They stood together, moved too much for speech, and then Elinor said briefly,—

"He shan't be sorry."

Katharine had come back to her old self.

"He won't be sorry," she said. "When are you going to marry him?"

"In a few weeks."

"I 'm glad of that. To-morrow I 'm going in town to work."

"You 'll live here, Kate? Gilbert was afraid you would n't."

"I shall at first, till Natalie gets well. She 'll marry Dick and they 'll take the house. Then I shall go in town for good."

Elinor held her peace, but she judged that Natalie would not marry Dick.

Gilbert Horne came home after his tramp, muddy from watercourses in the valley and wind-blown from the heights. He had walked all the afternoon, the thought of Elinor within him like a keen anticipation. Night and day, the dual life brooded over him, and warmed him with its wings. He could not fancy the woman spirit beside him always. He beckoned it in his dreams and then exorcised it like an unwelcome guest. In that he was less simple than she. According to the way of women, who go to their sacrament more calmly than men, she was thinking only of the sweet ways of daily living, and wondering more whether she could learn New England cooking than whether he would satisfy her soul. But he was taking it all like a tremendous contract he must fulfill, and asking the birds, in their raptures, whether they minded the building of a nest. It seemed to him unfair of natural life to let him come to his own so late, when he had none of the audacities of youth to bid him risk the woman in an untried bond. Yet when he had beaten out his argument to the sky and the grass and trees, he stopped and laughed aloud. He was happy. Earth joy was in him, and the woman herself presaged his heaven.

That night after his supper, when Cassie tended him like a shadow, he went into the library to look at his letters before going over to Elinor. He had laid down the last one when Cassie was beside him. He glanced up at her and smiled warmly. He liked her as a part of his olden life, but he included every one now in the circle of a new well-wishing.

"What is it, Cassie?" he asked. She had on a dark dress, unlike the kind belonging to her daily service, and it made her look older, yet more delicate also. Something had softened her to a sweet nobility.

"I came to tell you we've decided to go away," she said quietly.

"We? who?"

"Aunt Sally and I."

"Going? Where, in the name of heaven?"

"We 've had the house fixed up, down at the Ridge. We may stay there a spell."

Gilbert wheeled about in his chair and looked at her.

"What 's the matter, Cassie?" he asked. "What 's happened here?"

"Aunt Sally ain't so young as she was," said Cassie, as if she had arranged her argument. "She ain't fit for much hard work. I could do it; but it seems better all round for me to go down there and take her with me."

"Nonsense!" said Gilbert, frowning. "Old Sally 's as tough as a knot. She never 'll die. If the work is too hard, get in somebody to help you. Get Mary Ann Balch."

"She 's coming," said Cassie. "She 's in the kitchen now."

"Well, let her stay there, and you and Sally camp out in the dining-room — or in the parlor. Come, come, Cassie! Don't be a goose."

"Good-by, Mr. Horne," said Cassie softly. "You 've been real good to us."

"No, I have n't either. You 've worked your fingers to the bone for me, and I 've let you do it, that 's all. And because you 're women, you like me the better for it. Come, Cassie, don't be a simpleton. This is your home. It 's going to be a good deal pleasanter than ever it was before. Now mind what I say. Set Mary Ann Balch to scrubbing, and you and Sally take a whip and an ox-goad and stand over her. Don't get these foolish ideas into Sally's head either. You two belong here."

"If there 's sickness we 'll come back," said Cassie. "If either of you need us!"

"Either of us? Mary Ann Balch or I?"

"No, not Mary Ann Balch. Good-by, Mr. Horne."

She went away into the kitchen, and Gilbert swore at the fire. Yet halfway across the orchard, he wondered whether it were not as well. Elinor should make her own household. The woman had entered into his garden, and thenceforth it was not the same.

She met him in the hall and like a wife put up her face to his. She had not done it before, and his heart stopped under the sweetness of her calm. Prophecy was in it of serene days given over to homely living. At last he need not meditate upon the world. It was his, and he could taste it, sweet or bitter, for himself.

So he forgot Cassie; but half an hour later, when Katharine came in, he remembered enough to say, —

"Cassie sprung a mine on me just now. She tells me she and old Sally are going."

Elinor was sitting by the window that looked on the orchard path. The words fitted the little drama she was watching through the dusk. The great farm wagon stood at Horne's door, and old John and Cassie were bringing out a trunk. Elinor got up and slipped out of the room. She ran across the orchard, a tremulous emotion clutching at her throat. Old Sally had mounted the wagon and sat there in stiff supremacy, clad in a wonderful paisley shawl and an inherited bonnet with a mourning veil. Old Sally looked like one who scorns to be moved, knowing the world is greater than any temporary convulsion in it.

"You be careful o' that hair trunk," she said to John. "You can't git them nowadays."

Cassie had just appeared in the doorway, and Elinor called her.

"Cassie! Come here! I want to speak to you."

Cassie came down the steps as if she moved unwillingly, and Elinor took her hand and drew her along into the shadow of the orchard.

"Cassie," she said, "you must n't."

"Yes, I must," said Cassie gently. She was very pale. Elinor looked at her, the nobility of her pose, the unassuming sweetness of her, and felt that pain at the heart which is the daily hurt of those who love and cannot benefit. They stood a moment in silence, the trees darkening about them, and the piercing melancholy of the frogs, the echo of all the springs that ever were, thrilling though the dusk.

"Cassie," said Elinor again, "I can't let you go."

"Don't you mind," said Cassie, "there ain't anything to mind about."

"This is your home. You grew up here. You made it a home. It 's yours, Cassie."

At once Cassie seemed like an older woman, dowered with a maternal gentleness.

"It 's real nice down there at the Ridge," she said soothingly, as we itemize good fortune for a discontented child. "I 'm going to have a garden. Maybe you 'll come down sometime. I should admire to have you."

The tears were in Elinor's eyes; but Cassie smiled, in a sweet assurance. It was easy to see what strength was in her: the strength out of good New England stock, fostered and fed by crystal air and cleanly living. Cassie was the taller, but Elinor put her arms about her, and kissed her on the lips.

"I 'll come, Cassie," she whispered, "and sometime you 'll come here."

"Maybe I will. Good-by." She turned back to the house, and Elinor stood watching. Cassie felt the trunks, with a practiced hand, to see if they were firmly set. Then she mounted to her place in the wagon, and old John climbed in and took his seat between the two. He gathered up the reins, but Cassie laid a hand on his. She turned about where Elinor stood like a phantom in the dusk.

"Don't you watch me out of sight," called Cassie, with a full note of reassurance in her tone. "It 's a bad sign. Good-by!"

But while Elinor's answer died upon the air, the wagon rolled away.

XXXVIII

THE ORCHARD

A VIBRANT sweetness moved the air. The earth was given over to summer heat as it had been to the winter's cold. There was no pale delaying in the woods. All the buds and blooms were before their season. Hepaticas had scarcely time to dare the winds before arbutus had come, and violets and all that delicate following. It hardly seemed a spring. It was like a summer set to tenderer uses, with promise and fulfillment mingled. Natalie felt herself strong again, though her delaying mind had scant pleasure in the body's heartening. It seemed to her at last as if the time had come to leave the habits of her illness and take up life again. When she found out that Gilbert and Elinor were to be married, she suddenly understood that they were delaying, from day to day, on her account. They were having patience with her sick fancy for staying on in Gilbert's house because she still had reminiscent terror of the walls she knew too well. So one day she moved, and Katharine, coming home at night, found her waiting on the veranda, with the news that she had come for good. That evening they two sat there in the dusk, while Gilbert and Elinor paced up and down the road, and the whippoorwill called liquidly from the orchard. Natalie and Katharine found a silent comfort in each other now. They talked very little, but Katharine had a wistful way of serving her, and Natalie accepted everything in humble wonderment. Katharine seemed to be atoning for something; no one but herself ever knew that it was her own numbness toward life save as it touched her own desires. She was reaching out delicate antennæ toward the world.

"You will want to close this house?" asked Natalie abruptly.

"I don't know what will be done," said Katharine. She was not free to speak. She knew Dick was meant to live here with Natalie, and as yet none of them could guess whether Natalie would come out of her strange little shell. She seemed to like them all impartially, in a bewildering way, and to be as grateful as a child, as pleased with little things. But she was different. The great offices of life lingered afar from her.

"You must n't wait for me," said Natalie. "I could go any time."

"Where, child? Where could you go?"

"Somewhere by the sea. That would be good for me. If I am going to live — I mean, I must get strong. Then in the winter I shall go in town and take rooms as we planned. I might even learn to do something. You are working. You love it, Katharine."

"We don't want you to do things," said Katharine. "We want you to be lily-white."

Though she had Dick in her mind, she dared not speak of him. Every day now she saw him at his work, and with new acquaintanceship respected him the more. He never rested, and his qualities shone; he had wedded his brilliancy of address to a new doggedness of habit. And he was gaining swiftly on his road; yet even so she found him a pathetic figure. Under all his courage he carried sadness, and the lines were deepening in his face. Katharine, who had ceased striving for herself, rebelled somewhat for him. Life was scourging him. She wanted him to linger, now and then, in a green grove with Natalie.

One day shortly after this, Gilbert and Elinor walked down to the old minister in the valley and were married. They came back and had supper by themselves, and Mary Ann Balch served them with dishes so modeled on Sally's that Gilbert felt a double sense of home. He had Elinor and he had the round of habit still complete. Since old Sally went, he had never thought of kitchen government at all, so far as these warm comforts were concerned; he did miss his two handmaids, but only when he wanted to open the kitchen door and throw a crack at Sally, or to tell Cassie how the woods were looking. Twice he had driven down to the Ridge to see them, each time to find Sally coolly regnant over pots and pans; but Cassie had been away in the woods. She had just gone, old Sally said; it was of no use waiting for her. Sally added, with a joyous eye-gleam that partook of prophecy, that the blacksmith came round pretty often. He had a new "hoss," and a buggy all varnished up complete.

But that night while Elinor broke bread with her husband, Cassie seemed to be there in the room, an invisible servitor. She brought no pain: only a pathetic sense of the travail decreed by life to bring some other life to bear. Nothing was lost. Every sweet thing seemed to have a little eternity of its own, where it beat on in pulsing beauty toward an unguessed goal.

Elinor was not afraid of pain now, either for herself or the beloved world. With this new chrism upon her, mystic abnegation became a proven sanity, and wonderings were merged in deeds.

When they got up from the table, she stopped to look about the room before their leaving of it.

"What is it?" asked Gilbert beside her. He was very still that day; but his eyes were unresting, and they followed her. At the door she paused, bidding good-by to Cassie: for tender prescience told her that after this one hour even such memories would be as light as shadows on the grass.

"Nothing," she answered, but as he bent to kiss her she put him away.

"Not here, dear!" she said. "Not now!"

But afterwards she did kiss him with an unwithholding mind.

It was a week after this that Natalie got up one morning, her will complete to give no further trouble. She wrote a letter to a house she knew down in a little fishing-place, to ask whether she could have board; and then with the letter beside her on the table, like a reminding messenger, she began clearing out her bureaus and assorting papers for a final leave. She meant to simplify. Henceforth she would live in a room, not in a house. She would travel light, like a soldier on his march. While she worked, a telegram was brought her. It was from grannie, who hated to write letters and scorned an economical terseness in her infrequent messages.

"We sail to-day. Levinski has sent for her. His brother is dead. They marry on her arrival."

Natalie crushed the paper into her pocket, and with an undefined emotion at her heart, went out of doors. She ran into the orchard, and lay down on the grass. There she stayed, her hands over her eyes because the green world burned too bright. Her mind pulsed in measures too broken for defining, and the bees buzzed in the orchard. The air was very still, save for the bees, and the orioles in the elms. She heard Elinor singing. Nobody had remembered Elinor could sing. It was a pure soprano, mounting like the horns of heaven. Once she heard Gilbert laugh. The world seemed swinging fast, yet with the security of what God planned, toward happiness. It made her dizzy. She trembled with the rush and motion of it.

The day was like the moment, a swift, bright pageant. She spent it out of doors, and had her dinner there. Later in the afternoon she went in to take off her grass-tumbled gown and put on a clean white dimity that made her look like a careful child. But the house was still too small for her, and she hurried back into the orchard, to sit there with a book. Katharine would be coming home. Not Dick: he stayed in town now, since Gilbert's marriage. She lay there in her chair and studied the orchard, as she had a thousand times. She loved it like a sentient thing, and thrift counseled her to get its loveliness by heart to carry with her, like a picture, into her old-maid home. All the tendrils of her life had twined about these trees and drawn some strength from them. Quick pulsings were in her blood; but not from fuller life, she told herself. It was the orchard. This was not New England, this little tract of trees inclosed by tumbling walls. It was enchantment mingled out of age and beauty.

The grass to-day was green enough to make the vision swim; it breathed out color like a mist. The tree trunks were still black, after the recent rain. They were curved into a gnarly wonder: here were lines to fit a weird imagining and then again an ample sweep of growth. The roof of her enchanted castle, the orchard leafage, was all tender green, packed close with petals, pink, and then again translucent snow touched with a fine-veined rapture. The smell of it was in Natalie's nostrils, and petals fell on her from honeyed blooms. The bees and she were equal pilferers. Studying the orchard, she let her fancy loose. Here were swift trains of maidens, satyrs, fauns, bacchantes, all moving in procession to bring in the year. Yet after all, this play with beauty was but a feint to keep her mind out of the road it was constrained to travel, and in spite of her it would return. It spoke and made her listen. She had here in her hand, it told her, the fruit of a long sowing. Dick was at work, and Lorraine at last had left him. He was not Natalie's, either by her wish or will. He was his own. If work were an inheritance, he had it. There fell upon her an awed humility, the fruit of answered prayer. The answer she would feed on all her life, a heavenly certainty. And for this day, she had the orchard.

Katharine came up from the station, and stood a moment on the veranda where Natalie could see her. She was talking with Elinor, and the difference between them struck Natalie, even at that distance, with a tender wonder over each. Elinor, dressed in some light spring prettiness, was bending in a gracious attitude, as if she had large gifts to offer to the world.

Katharine stood straight and tall in her stout skirt and linen waist. She had taken off her hat, and Natalie, though she could not see her face, knew how it looked in these home-comings after work: flushed under its disheveled hair, dusty even, and a little worn, but alive with the spirit that goes to dull deeds gladly met, — the happy worker's face. The two women clasped hands, and Elinor walked away down the drive. Katharine went in, and once she called, —

"Natalie!"

But Natalie did not answer. She could not break her orchard dream. There would be no other day like this. But when the sun sank lower, she got up unwillingly, and said good-by. It was dusk in the orchard, under the lowness of the trees, yet the light struck sweetly there. And as she closed her unread book, she saw Dick coming. Her heart leaped to meet him; but still she knew it was not he that moved her. It was the orchard. He came along the path bareheaded, and she held the book with both her hands. She could not put them out to him. He, too, like Katharine, wore the toiler's face.

"Well, Natalie?" he said. Even his voice had changed. It had reserves of will, and under that a fall of sadness. She thought of Gilbert's laugh, and was jealous for an instant because his middle age had a joyance denied her lost love in his youth. Without conscious purpose she opened the book, and took out grannie's telegram. She gave it to him, and he read it. Then he smiled a little, absently.

"I wish grannie 'd stayed with us," he said.

She could not speak. He gave back the slip, and stood there studying her face.

"Well, Natalie?" he said again.

"Has Katharine come home?"

Yet she knew that.

"Yes. Much as ever, though. She 'd rather work than eat. I almost think we 're going to get something out of that old magpie's nest."

"She works too hard. So do you, too. You must have pleasures."

"I shall have pleasures when I get you back again."

"I hate to see you tired and dull. It is n't like you. Katharine says so."

"I 'm deadly lonesome, Natalie."

"Do you think Lorraine will marry him?" she asked, against her will.

"Levinski? I hope so." He spoke quite simply. "Then maybe she 'll let grannie settle down. Grannie 's a dear, Natalie!" He came a step nearer, and looked at her searchingly. "You 're different somehow."

"Am I?" Her lips were trembling, and she did not want to look at him. Yet his eyes held hers, and would not let them go.

"You 're a little bit more like Natalie," he said, as if he read some message vital to him. "There 's a new kind of life in your face. What are you thinking, child?"

What she was really thinking had caught her by the throat, and now it held her there. The sight of him grew slowly on her: Dick not in his smart trappings as she used to see him, but hot and tired from his work. His hair was moist and tumbled from the trying day, his coat was dusty. His dear shabbiness struck at the centre of her heart, and her heart answered in so many words, —

"Why, he 's my man! He 's mine!"

The slow flooding of her face crept upward to her hair. She stood there all pink, her eyes great wells of still emotion, and Dick absently noted two white apple petals on the top of her head. He seemed to be studying her in every phase that touched his chances with her.

"I 've been thinking, Natalie," he said, in a commonplace way, like one who sought out new efficacies for life, "that maybe if you kissed me you might remember. Something might come back."

Natalie moved softly toward him like a wondering creature drawn by a perfect kindliness. He took her gently, and she put up her hands and laid them on his head, in that divinest gesture of a woman's cherishing.

"O my love!" she said. "My love!"

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